YALIVoices: Fatma Abdalla - Education a key to change for Kenyan professional [audio]

Fatma Abdalla is a product of community action. Growing up, her mother would fundraise to pay her tuition. “The community stood by me so that I could gain my degree,” the business school graduate tells YALI Voices. “I feel that it’s my time now to pay back to the community.”

In 2014, she founded Lamu Professionals Forum as a way for like-minded young professionals from the Island of Lamu, Kenya, to share their experiences with education as a means to grow socio-economic opportunity and empower the whole community.

Fatma Abdalla gives back to her community by organizing a #YALILearns event on the rights of women and girls. (Courtesy of Fatma Abdalla)

“I believe that education is key, and that each and every youth in the community should benefit from it so that the whole community can benefit at large,” she says.

The forum focuses on education advocacy, employment opportunity awareness and entrepreneurship.

“So we don’t just tell them about the employment or the formal opportunities that are available, we also sensitize them on how they could create employment, so as we improve the living standards of the community in my county.”

Abdalla doesn’t see community service as an act of charity, but as an act of community-building that lifts up everyone involved, and she wants the YALI Network to embrace community service as a tool for creating a more prosperous society.

“YALI Network members, on the Mandela Day, please just go and do something you are passionate about to the community, be it small or big, it doesn’t matter, and make sure that we all bring an idea of unity towards a better African continent.”

Hear Abdalla tell how she harnesses networks of volunteers to spur socio-economic change by listening to the YALI Voices podcast or read the complete transcript below:

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE

BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAMS (IIP)

“YALI Voices Podcast Transcript: Fatma Abdalla”

FATMA ABDALLA: YALI Network members, please just go and do something you are passionate about to the community, be it small or big, it doesn’t matter, and make sure that we all bring an idea of unity towards a better African continent.

VOICE OVER: Greetings and welcome to another edition of YALI Voices. The YALI Voices podcast is

your home for sharing the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative Network.

Meet Fatma Abdalla.

FATMA ABDALLA: OK, my name is Fatma Abdalla from Kenya.

VOICE OVER: Currently, Fatma is vice chairperson of the Lamu County Public Service board, where she advises the county government on human resource management and development. She also works on ensuring compliance with the principles of public service and good governance. She has over 10 years of experience in finance, administration and management.

Fatma is also a Mandela Washington Fellow.

FATMA ABDALLA: As a Mandela Washington Fellow in 2016 I must first admit that this experience was a life-changing experience for me — a turning point in my career life — and for my community.

VOICE OVER: She's the founder of the Lamu Professionals Forum, an organization of like-minded professionals who are creating awareness on the importance of education and opportunities, both formal and informal, to spur socio-economic growth through economic empowerment.

We start with why Fatma thinks it's important to give back to her community.

[INTERLUDE]

FATMA ABDALLA: So why should we pay back to the community? We can't afford to just keep the experience and the exposure just to ourselves. So I feel that whatever I have learned from the experience, from the leadership calls, from meeting different people, and what I've learned from different organizations the way they do things, I should as well replicate that to the community.

I've always been passionate about community work. Before I went for the fellowship, I used to volunteer at community level and having the experience and the exposure made me do things differently and in a better way. The impact that I have seen through the — I mean, through conducting various programs is different from the way I used to do it before. So I feel it's essential that as a Mandela Fellow I should share what I have gained from the United States so that the community can benefit as well.

[INTERLUDE]

MS. ABDALLA: Why I feel it's important that we should pay back to the community without being rewarded? I personally — I come from a very humble family background; I grew up so passionate about education. Seeing my family very poor, I wanted to make a difference, and my parents had to do a series of fundraising to make sure that I go to school. And I thought that having experienced all that in my early childhood, I should also give back to the community because the community also stood for me to make sure that I achieved my dreams. And I've always dreamed that education is key; that once you're educated, it will be able to alleviate poverty. And I must admit that in a community or a society set up that one has to give back to the community.

As I've said earlier that I went through difficulties to gain my education, having coming from a background where it was very difficult for my family to raise my education or my fees, and the

community stood by me so that I could gain my degree. After that, I struggled to work so that I'm able to pay for myself for my master's, so it was — it is an experience that I felt that it's my time now to pay back to the community.

So immediately I started working. I will do sort of mentoring young kids on the importance of education because I know it has changed my life and that of my family, and I wanted it to be replicated also to the community 'cause I believe that education is key, and that each and every youth in the community should benefit from it so that the whole community can benefit at large.

[INTERLUDE]

MS. ABDALLA: I want to tell those who feel that any work is not for free. In my perception that is not true. Even according to our religion, we are told that if you help somebody then definitely God will reward you for that in-kind, not actually in cash. People should not expect to be rewarded for doing something good for the community. We should all have that heart for helping the community, so that we can all come to a level whereby we can all afford a good standard of living.

VOICE OVER: Here Fatma shares what motivates her as a member of a professional organization and why finding time to volunteer is important to her.

MS. ABDALLA: OK, this brings me back to how I go to learn about YALI; always passionate about education. Always passionate about women, because I've seen my mom struggling, doing tailoring, vendoring to make sure also she supports me, she helps my dad who was just a supervisor at the telecom company, so I've seen them struggling in life. So I've always been passionate about girls' education, specific, and the women empowerment.

So in 2014, we established the Lamu Professional Forum to incorporate all the professionals from Lamu as a way of them paying back to the community 'cause my story is not just about me — almost the rest of the women and the men who went through education system they were helped in some way or the other. So we decided to come together.

So I founded this community-based organization called Lamu Professional Forum, and we decided that we are going to address three key issues. One of them is on education advocacy, because I felt that that is key.

And then on the other issue was the creation of awareness on employment opportunities and other opportunity, and thirdly, on aspiring of socio-economic activity. So through the education advocacy, we have done and we intend to do several activities so as to realize that, because our vision is to have an enlightened community.

We also have the Vision 2030, which also will come with so many opportunities — the employment opportunities. So we don't just tell them about the employment or the formal opportunities that are available, we also sensitize them on how they could create employment, so as we improve the living standards of the community in my county. So that's how we address it.

Then we intend also to do like free tuition services so that they are able to improve on their performance because they will not be able to achieve what we want if they have poor performance. So we are intending to do that, but we have not realized because of lack of resources and at the

same time provision of materials to schools, to the student, so that they get informed, they get exposed on what is expected of them.

Then when it comes to the creation of employment opportunity, what we have actually tried to do as Lamu Professional Forum, and intend to do, is to create workshop-like skill development workshop. As I've told you, I work as the vice chair of Lamu County Public Service Board, and one of my main mandate is to advise the county government on human resource-related issue, including recruitment of county government staff. And I found this gap that the opportunities — the employment opportunities available are not being fully realized by the community. As I've said earlier, we want to — we thought of doing something so as to make those who are privileged to be — I mean, who are educated to get this opportunity and to become competitive both locally, at the county level, and also outside, 'cause you realize that you conduct an interview and people can't express themselves. So they're not competitive. You realize that when they apply for that particular job, they don't have the necessary skills to do the application. So what we do is to, I mean, capacity-build the graduates now on résumé application, how to present themselves in the interview so that they become competitive, and also encourage them to also create the employment, not to just wait for the government opportunities or private-sector opportunity, then themselves they could create employment.

Then lastly now, for the economic empowerment, we felt, yes, our women, especially women and youth, they've been struggling because of lack of education, as I've told you. They need something that they could do to sustain themselves. So actually, we are trying also, because, as I've told you earlier, because of financial problems and resources, we are unable to realize all these things because it's huge, and you realize that all these things I'm telling are interrelated.

So what we want for these women and the youth empowerment is to see if there's an activity they could do and is sustainable. And what we have done is to talk to the women to venture into maybe agribusiness, so that they are able to eat maybe in their gardens, to feed themselves, and to solve the problem of food insecurity and to, as well, create business opportunities for themselves.

[INTERLUDE]

MS. ABDALLA: Initially, I must admit, it was very difficult getting people to accept the idea and the concept you want because of time — almost all of them are working in the government sector — and to accept what you do. But initially, they came to realize that this is important because we were deprived of that, because at our time we didn't have anybody to tell us this is the right career to do. So they also feel the importance of doing this. So we will call people in a meeting and we will share the vision of Lamu Professional Forum and what we want to achieve for the future generation. And, I must admit, that we have, like right now, we have almost over 35 dedicated Lamu Professional Forum members, who when we have any kind of activity, they volunteer without expecting any return.

VOICE OVER: Fatma is an active YALI Network member who has held several YALI Learns events in her community. We discussed how she uses the YALI online resources and why she volunteers to share her knowledge.

MS. ABDALLA: Yes, I have conducted several program. I used to do programs with the American — and I'm still doing some programs with the American Space in Lamu, and we have capacity-build

women, we have capacity-build youth. And I've shared with them several times about YALI, the importance of YALI, what kind of resources they could benefit from YALI. The online courses, which are there, that you don't need actually — because the American Space provide the facilities, the computer, and the internet, they could just come do the courses. You don't have to go to college for those who cannot afford, but they could come and, or access internet and do those particular courses and get a certificate. So I will encourage them to do that as one of way of capacity-building themselves.

I remember after I've done an online course on the rights of women and girls, and I took it up. First, I decided to talk about the rights of girls and education with the mothers because I felt that they were the key stakeholders. So I did first a workshop with the mothers and teachers just to get an insight of what is preventing these girls from pursuing their studies or finishing their studies. And it was very overwhelming because I get to learn from the teachers that there are several problems which are hindering the girls. One of them is poverty, and other issues to do with menses — some will say that early marriages — and we came up with solutions as well on how we are going to tackle these problems that they feel are hindering our girls from pursuing their studies.

So after that, we decided now let's go and hear from the horse's mouth, so we went to two different schools. We sampled two different schools. We went, and you can't believe it, we had a very interactive session with the girls. We asked themselves to tell us what are the main problem? We've heard from your parents, we've heard from your teachers, but we want to hear from you. What is preventing you from finishing your education? They will tell us the reason and one of them they'll say that the peer pressure, having a boyfriend, thinking, you know, the adolescent stage is disturbing them, and then also forced marriages. So we did that program and the girls promised that they will pass this crusade to their other fellow girls and to make sure that they will finish their studies and encourage others to also finish their study because they saw the importance of it.

Then I also did for the climate change — the YALI Goes Green — I also got a pledge for that. I also went to schools. We did one at American Space. Then we went to schools; I did with Lamu girls, and it was very nice. At least they appreciated that people come talk to us about girls, telling us about something different, and we were amazed, in fact, that the girls knew so much about the climate and they were so much interested. And we even had an activity like planting trees. So it was wonderful.

And also at workplace, I've also encouraged other members, or other public officers, to also join in YALI. When it comes to the application of this kind of opportunities, like the Mandela Washington Fellowship, and the East Africa (Regional Leadership Center), I encourage them to apply because it's one way also — it's — I don't feel that it's a reward. It's one way of capacity-building them further and expose them because, I must admit that this fellowship has given me a platform because I never used to put more emphasis about networking. I never saw the importance of it till after my, I mean, when I was there I learned how important networking is and that is something that I've taken back with me back home.

So yes, I sensitize people and, like this time two of our members from the forum have been selected. One has gone to the East Africa, and one is a Mandela Fellow. So I can probably say that I'm doing a great job. And some of the youth they consider me as their mentor and a role model, and I feel proud when somebody tells me that "I look up to you." They come for my advice — "What can I do? I have this problem. I need to apply for this particular position, or I need to do this kind of degree; do you

think it's marketable? What can I do?" So I will advise them accordingly depending on their interest levels.

VOICE OVER: July 18 is Mandela Day; a day of service across the world. Fatma talked about her plans for July 18, and she encourages YALI Network members to make sure they also commemorate this day of service.

MS. ABDALLA: I want that day, on Mandela Day — you see when — this YALI thing has brought all the African country together. We now know each other. We can call each other brother and sister. Before, we never had an idea somebody from Uganda doing a great job; we never have an idea somebody from Tanzania, but the YALI Network has brought us together. And, in fact, there are other people who are already doing a collaborated effort in ensuring that they do something now not only just for their community, but for the African continent. So I want to see that all YALI members coming together and do one particular project. In fact, there's an initiative by one of the YALI member, we do a particular program on that particular day just as a way of showing how grateful we are for this program and also bringing Africa together.

YALI Network members, on the Mandela Day, please just go and do something you are passionate about to the community, be it small or big, it doesn't matter, and make sure that we all bring an idea of unity towards a better African continent.

[INTERLUDE]

VOICE OVER: It was great hearing about Fatma's volunteer work with the Lamu Professional Forum and her enthusiastic support for sharing knowledge by hosting YALI Learns events. This is a great example of how she is using her skills to help future generations in her community.

As always, thanks for listening to another YALI Voices Podcast.

Be sure to come back for more inspiring stories from young African leaders on the YALI Voices podcast.

Join the YALI Network at yali.state.gov and be a part of something bigger!

Our theme music is "E – Go Happen," by Grace Jerry and produced by The Presidential Precinct.

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YALI Voices: Nobel Peace Prize nominee

and peace builder Victor Ochen wants to know: "Where are the Mandelas?" [audio]

At a young age, Nobel Peace Prize nominee and YALI Network member Victor Ochen made a calculated decision to live a life of peace after growing up in the "darkness of fear" in war-torn northern Uganda. "My choice remains peace and will always be peace," he says in a YALI Voices podcast.

Ochen became a self-made peace builder, not letting a lack of opportunity stop him from creating the society he wanted to see. As a 13-year-old refugee in an internally displaced persons camp, he formed a peace club to "mobilize fellow young people to choose peace and stop the war." In 2005, he founded the African Youth Initiative Network to empower youths through peace and reconciliation initiatives that address the impact of violence on communities. Ten years later, Ochen and the network were nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for their work with war victims.

Ochen believes that Africa needs young people to be strong leaders across all sectors of society to overcome endemic conflict, poverty and injustice.

He points to victorious African-born athletes in the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio as a sign of the impact that war and conflict have had on Africa's prosperity and its place in the world. "If all Olympic medalist winners returned back home, 80 percent of the gold medalists would have come to Africa. But they are all refugees in other countries. When are we going to bring back home what is supposed to be home?" he asks.

This Mandela Day, Ochen encourages the YALI Network to reflect on Nelson Mandela's example of compassionate, responsible leadership through service. "Both President Washington and Mandela had the opportunity to become kings of their countries, but they chose to be leaders. They chose to leave power. They chose to work for people. And they laid the foundation upon which their nations became countries that are flourishing today." He sees Mandela as a model for African youth to emulate as they raise up their communities across the continent.

Ochen wants Africans to recognize that "we could still have the best leader of our time coming from the continent." He asks, "Where are the Mandelas?"

Hear more of Ochen's thoughts on governance, leadership, peace building and the YALI Network, including his call to action for Mandela Day, by listening to his interview on YALI Voices, or read the transcript below.

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE

BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAMS (IIP)

"YALI Voices Podcast Transcript: Victor Ochen"

MR. OCHEN: I grew up in the darkness of fear, of death, witnessing the horrors of crimes and brutality with whole strength upon the innocent poor people. But with the hope that if I acted well, I would bring the positive change I'm looking for.

VOICE-OVER: This is the YALI Voices podcast, your home for sharing the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative Network. Today we're talking to Victor Ochen.

MR. OCHEN: My name is Victor Ochen. Ochen spelled as O-C-H-E-N.

VOICE-OVER: A Ugandan peace activist, director of the African Youth Initiative Network, Nobel Peace Prize nominee and YALI Network member. In 2016 Victor was appointed as one of the global advisers to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on gender, forced displacement and protection.

Victor is a man who believes in positive change, who long ago decided that he had it within his power to see and do things differently. As a child growing up in a war zone, he has seen great hardship — in his community and his own home. But he was called to service. And he believes that Africa's youth and the YALI Network have important roles to play in promoting peace, unity and trust.

First, Victor shares how he found his life's calling. Then he'll tell us what inspires him, how he keeps going in the face of human suffering and misery, and how YALI Network members can play a role in serving their communities, Africa and the world.

[INTERLUDE]

MR. OCHEN: I got the job I'm doing today with my organization with a single mission as to mobilize youth and communities in promoting peace and justice, but above all, strengthening the leadership of young people in their communities and their societies to become actors for positive change.

So I was inspired by my own reality — my childhood, my suffering, my life I lived. It was always a life calling that needed change, that needed rescue, that needed a means of thinking forward. So that's why I came and said: "For how long am I going to wait for real change to come into my society? And who will bring the change, and when will change come? I'm getting older. Suffering is not stopping. And people are dying. Hopelessness is increasing." And that's what I thought: that instead of sitting and watching and expecting something to come, I asked myself, without much education, without much resources, without any connection — because living in the war zone in northern Uganda as a child, I'd never seen peace. It was difficult to know anything beyond our borders. So I lacked opportunity then of connection, and that's why I said, "Let me look down to my community, down to myself, and see what role can I play to make a difference and what role can I play to change what I don't want in a society." So this is how I was inspired by my own hardships, by my own suffering, but with a hope that if I acted well, I would bring the positive change I'm looking for. So I decided, let me step forward and bring my best self forward.

[INTERLUDE]

MR. OCHEN: I do think always when you are in a position of hardship, you are limited to everything — no resources, no knowledge, no exposures. So it's very difficult sometimes to imagine that you can do it. And, yes indeed, that was the same feeling that I had that I couldn't believe I would ever make it because I looked around. All we are faced with hardships, impossibilities and struggle and pains and losses. And then I said, "Yes, what do I need to become a peace builder? Do I need bachelor's degrees? Do I need master's degrees? And if I can't get it, that means I won't be a peace builder." I

said, “No, you don’t need master’s degrees, bachelor’s degrees or a high level of education to build peace in a society. All you need is good heart, good intention.” And if you want to bring about change, is the change in policy or the change in human life? We are working towards giving a human face of what we are doing. So we put human face ahead of our qualifications. And that was the best qualification, having human love, human face, making sure that our actions are human and it answers the human questions.

VOICE-OVER: Victor was born amidst war, during the peak of the bloody conflict of the Lord’s Resistance Army. He grew up in an internally displaced people’s camp in deep poverty, where for over seven years, Ochen, together with his family, lived on one meal a day — if that.

MR. OCHEN: What inspired me to do the work that I’m doing now, which is about speaking for the voiceless, working for peace, promoting the concept that African people are human beings that should be treated with dignity, is because of the life I lived. I lived in war zone. I spent my entire childhood growing, surviving from diseases, abduction, child soldiers recruitment. I grew up in the darkness of fear, of death, you know, witnessing the horrors of crimes and brutality being exhibited at most — with whole strength upon the innocent, poor people in northern Uganda. This is the society I grew up in. I grew up in the midst of the generation who had no hope, whose choice was limited to, “How can I revenge, how can I also let them feel the pain?”

So this is what I felt. I said: “No, I am just simply sick and tired of my own suffering. I’m sick and tired of my own, you know, day-to-day fear. For how long am I going to live this kind of life?” So that feeling, that moment of — you know, the breakthrough moment of contemplation that came in my heart, it’s also the breakthrough moment of contemplation that went to other people’s heart, young people’s heart, of which most of them ended up picking up the guns to go and fight. But I said: “I’m not going to fight anybody; I’m not going to be a reason for someone’s death. I’m not going to be a reason for society’s destruction. In fact, I should be a reason for rebuilding, reconciliation, peacebuilding, protection and making sure that every person lives a life of dignity.” This is the society I was growing up in, this is the society I wanted to become part of it, and I want it to be a society, my community to be a society where we look and trust each other, because we are all human. We cannot just think because of our sex, gender, identity, orientation that we should hate somebody. No, we should all work towards a better community.

So I wanted change, but where was change coming from? I looked up to myself, in addition to complementing efforts by international communities and my government as well.

[INTERLUDE]

I made a commitment from my childhood that I would choose peace, no matter what happens. My choice remains peace and will always be peace. But also I see challenges that continue from disease, poverty, starvation, you know, political mismanagement, lack of shared governance. All these are factors causing all the suffering. And I think all this needs mindset change. It needs leadership inclusion. It needs leadership tolerance. When we create a system where change is violent, where change is about death — kill that person so that a new person come to power — that is not the change we should — this is what has been driving Africa. You know, you kill your ways to power instead of loving your way to power. This is not what we should working for — we should work for. How do we build a society, raise a society, where leadership is shared? Leadership is about people;

it’s not about position. And that takes me back to what I said: the integrity of our power, the integrity of our leadership, the integrity of our position. If we make it a culture that for you to be rich in Africa, you must be a politician — leadership is not merely political. You can be a political leader and successful leader. You can be a community leader. You can be a great cultural leader. These are the kinds of people that we should work for — we should really move and mobilize them.

VOICE-OVER: In 2005, Victor founded the nongovernmental organization called the African Youth Initiative Network. His intent is the creation of a functioning, mutually trusting and inclusive society. In his quest for peace and justice, he hopes to mobilise the active participation of youth and communities.

MR. OCHEN: Africa continues to face a lot of challenges. With all the resources, we are having 60 percent of the world’s agricultural land. But why all this poverty? Why all the suffering? It’s because there’s governance gap somewhere. And that governance gap, how can we make it answerable to the reality on the ground? The challenge has been how — not about “what” but about “how.” How has been — should we fight them? Should we protest them? Should we name and shame them? Has it worked? In most cases, it hasn’t. In fact, it has widened the division, the tribalism, and reinforced the negativity towards one another. I think, as a young generation, this is our time to step forward, step with good intention, bring our best self forward and work for the leadership that is inclusive, the leadership that is respectful, based upon dignity. I know democracy should be appreciated. And we should love our ways to power, not kill our ways to power. I think this is what we should step up so much for.

And, above all, the image we have is terrible, not only because it’s being talked about, but also the reality. Around the world, you talk about Africa. The first definition that comes in your mind is poverty; it’s war; it’s suffering. Recently, we had Olympics in Brazil. If all Olympic medalist winners returned back home, 80 percent of the gold medalists would have come to Africa. But they are all refugees in other countries. There was one particular scenario where the top four finishers were all Africans — Somalia, Ethiopia, Eritrea, then Somalia again. But none of them represented the continent. So this is the kind of losses we are making. When are we going to bring back home what is supposed to be home?

So this is the kind of inspiration we need to open up our space, open up our world and kind of engage in a more meaningful and sincere dialogue. Leadership based on dialogue is the only way to go. It will answer the question; it will bridge the gap; it will build trust, which is key. Without dialogue — but how do we come to dialogue? As young people, it is our responsibility; it is our generation to come forward. Respect should drive our dialogue. Tolerance should be the reason for engagement. If we don’t respect our leaders, they will not respect us. If we don’t come to engage with love, we will always get a reply in violence. And then that’s where the problem comes in because can we adjust our hearts for the goodness of the continent? Of course, we are not tolerating impunity, not tolerating injustice. But we will reach a point where we need to come to a compromise, where leaders need to listen to their people and people need to listen to their leaders. Without this, it won’t be in a way we are going to bring any change, especially among the young people. Young people today, when they hear their leaders speak, they think they are making excuses, usual false promises, you know, promoting — defending their failures or looking forward to how they can die in power. The image the young people have of their leadership is terrible. And the same way, when

leaders hear the young people, they hear the complainants, the abusers, the protesters, the extremists. These two must work together if we must. Can we create a culture where the young get reassured that they are part of the system? They earn the legitimate honors of the future? Can we create a point where the leaders in power know that we are not just merely hunting them out of power, but we're saying, "Let them create a culture where leadership is shared, and in a respectful way."

[INTERLUDE]

MR. OCHEN: It's a very important question that every young leader, YALI member — whether it be a fellow or a member or a network alumni, beneficiaries or associates — should know that the spirit upon which YALI was founded was on a community, was about people, was about the future, and was about inclusion. Those presidents did not at any point think they are the only best humans on Earth. They knew they were brought forward to serve their people. Both President Washington and Mandela had the opportunity to become kings of their countries, but they chose to be leaders. They chose to leave power, when they even still wanted more to stay in power. They chose to work for people. And they laid the foundation upon which their nations became countries which are flourishing today.

So this is a community spirit. This is the human spirit. So, as young people, as young generation, bearing the identity of these significant leaders, we should be ready to defend that image and defend it with respect, defend it with integrity, the integrity of our power, the integrity of our choices, the integrity of our actions. This must be absolute integrity as a young generation.

So this is why community that young people comes from, the members, YALI members, come from, are the communities in need — in need of peace, in need of prosperity, in need of growth and in need of change, the mindset change. We may not be having enough infrastructure. But, most importantly, if we change our mindset, there is a good reason for us to be hopeful. And this is why we are looking forward to how can we help society regain and be better by bringing about the new leadership, the young generation. I trust in young people. They live in a society like I grew up in. But they are the people whose hearts are in the right places; they are the people with integrity; they are the people to trust.

And I think every YALI member must know that they have society's trust and they have been given space. We appreciate the government of the United States for thinking that we cannot do it alone. We cannot think we are — foreign aids to Africa will change Africa. We need to develop the potential, local potential and the potential for growth. And when they think about it at a community level, these young people's mission should be about — not primarily about GDP. Let them think about livelihood. This is where change comes from. If the families cannot afford to feed their children, if they cannot afford to prevent the local conflict, then we are headed for bigger disaster. YALI could be a reason to tear down the tribalism wall that has torn apart Africa. There could be an opportunity to bring about local economic growth. There could be a reason for a future where young generations are driving change and positive change.

[INTERLUDE]

MR. OCHEN: My advice to the YALI communities, the YALI members, the YALI Network, who

probably doesn't believe that an individual can make a difference: First of all, they came together on the concept that they were individuals who stood for what drives change. And I think it's very important that sometimes you might see yourself, you're in the deep sea alone — a sea of poverty, a sea of misery, alone — and you might find that it's too big for you to make a difference. But maybe perhaps just a whistle blowing or raising an alarm or stepping forward, raising a light that can brighten the society is important. So my guess here would be the whole mission was you come together as young people, share your knowledge, share your experience, be exposed to the point that you are not alone. Know that beyond your borders is another YALI member doing something.

So, in your community, if you do the little bit you can do, bit by bit makes a bundle. And I think, with the support available from the development partners, in this case the U.S. government, I think it's very important that this support is support given, channeled to the YALI community, not limiting it to YALI alumni only, not limiting to YALI fellows. How can we go beyond fellowship because we are creating a culture of YALI? There are wonderful people, they have wonderful young people outside there who have never had opportunity to become a fellow. These people need space. These people need to be supported. These people need to be recognized and exposed. So this is where our support should be extended.

Also, the network members, we should have a goal. What do we foresee in five years' time? Where do we see YALI? Could we form the strongest web network of change-makers in the continent where, based upon stronger solidarity, based upon national African identity, and based upon human identity, we are able to drive change, the change that we want for our continent? Alone sometimes you are too lonely and you get lost. But if you are alone to represent a powerful network, a web network somewhere, you become part of the structure. I know the fear is sometimes you are in the forest of miseries and you are lost. But if you communicate, you engage, you network with other people, there's a good reason for you to never feel alone in the struggle.

So my advice is, yes, it gets lonely, it gets tough. Maybe you feel like also so abandoned by international communities, by your own society. But I think when you have your heart in the right place, like you do, you are a real seed for change.

[INTERLUDE]

MR. OCHEN: Every year, yes, the world celebrates Mandela Day. And my question would be, in the present Africa, what would Mandela say if he was alive? Even if he's not alive but his dreams and legacy lives, what is Mandela saying about the present Africa?

First of all, Mandela would appreciate the YALI spirit, coming together to empower everybody from every corner of the continent and to build classical means of engaging with the world. This is key; this is important. And then, on a day that the world celebrates the most commendable, remarkable human ever we have had in the continent, I think Africans should first of all celebrate that even though Africa has seen the worst in life for the last decades and decades, since the creation of the universe, we could still have a leader like Mandela coming from the continent, the best leader of our time, coming from Africa. This tell us something.

Then going back also to the history, the history tell us that people with greater legacies of commendable leadership that remains to drive the world today, the Martin Luther King, their roots

are here. Even Jesus was somewhere here in Africa [LAUGHING] — he was a refugee here in Africa. So, it goes back to the present — you know, generations should realize that Africa, whereas it has seen the worst, but the best has always come from home. So where are the new Mandelas? Where are the new faces that will sustain this legacy?

So, on that day, we should be driven by the values of Mandela, the value of tolerance, stepping beyond your enemy lines, engaging with your should-have-been-Number-1 enemy. I gave my story today about how I employed my own brother's abductor. And I found peace, you know, in the whole process, within myself and with him.

So, the spirit of Mandela is a spirit of reconciliation. YALI should step forward and put their message clear on how do they foresee Africa, a reconciled continent. How do they foresee harmony between the rivaling forces within Africa? This is the spirit of Mandela, who could forgive and embrace the white population in South Africa to work with. This is what we should be promoting. And then, the respect of the will of the people. And sometimes, your people forces you too much as a leader because of the few individuals whom you hear them would raise what is being either talked about or they are shown what is being talked about. And then they tell you to stay in power forever. If Mandela could step down from power — he reached a point of saying, "I am not only respecting the talk of the people. I am listening to my heart." I think this is when we should do that. Sometimes, leader says, "I am not going to leave power because my people want me in power." You know, it's not only good for yourself to leave power and respecting the tools — the institution, you know, the document of freedom, but it's also good to set a precedent. If Mandela could do it, we think other leaders should also do it.

So dialogue is important. Creating harmony is important — promoting the spirit of reconciliation. This should be an opportunity where on that day, YALI should launch a movement, a movement that would sync about promoting a united Africa where people dialogue in harmony to address problems that is killing our people. Because it's not about us. If it was about Mandela, he could have lived in power forever, could have been the king of South Africa. But he said, "No, it's all about people." So the leadership of the people is the leadership that should be promoted by the Young African Leaders Network.

[INTERLUDE]

VOICE-OVER: Before we wrap up with Victor, he had one more thing he wanted to share that may surprise you. He applied for — but was not selected — for a Mandela Washington Fellowship.

MR. OCHEN: I was so inspired because, all along, I was pursuing any opportunity that could put me in touch with fellow young people around the continent and around the world. When I heard about the opportunity, I applied for it. [LAUGHING] I applied for YALI twice. I couldn't be taken. And up to now, I've never been taken yet, so [LAUGHING] — which is fine because somehow I represented the majority of the population around the world who applied for this opportunity. But not everybody can be taken. It's just good, but good for certain fewer numbers, which — you can't blame that, "Why was I not taken?"

But what I'm saying also is, upon learning about YALI's mission, YALI's dream, and, you know, the vision, the objective, I found it fitting to what I was doing locally, and I said, "Well, I'm so happy to

know that my choice to act in a way that I work towards transforming my society is not mistaken, is a choice which is right and is a choice that complements what international communities, the intellectuals of this world, are also thinking. I think at a local level, but also that people think at a global level. And then I thought now maybe, with the YALI Network coming in, if I took part in it, I would be taking my local community knowledge to international communities and also bring international to my local communities. So that's why I worked so hard about it.

But then, since it did not happen, I did not give up, and I said, "I do not need to be a fellow in order to be a YALI. I am a YALI, but I'm not a fellow." But that's okay because the spirit upon which YALI was founded was based on the fact that, you know, the top historical leaders whose dreams led to the founding of their nations, that their citizens, their people, may live in peace, that future generations may embrace the concept of unity, which Washington had for America, which Mandela had for Africa and for South Africa, which President Obama came and embraced and said we need to — our generation needs to help achieve the vision of our founding fathers.

So this is the spirit upon which we needed, and this is the spirit upon which it should be passed on to the young generation. And I am very happy that my experience with YALI today is phenomenal because I meet amazing young fellows who have gone to Washington or to the United States, people who have been around the continent, enormous training in the region that I think is just brilliant. And what inspires me the most about YALI right now: It has become the largest powerful network of young African leaders, which I see it creating a powerful transformation because it's inspiring growth, not only economic growth but human growth, unity, cementing the relationship, bridging the gap, creating networks, creating understanding and facilitating atmosphere for trust. This is what we needed in the continent, and I think this is what YALI is achieving remarkably.

VOICE-OVER: Thanks, everyone, for tuning into another YALI Voices Podcast and thank you, Victor Ochen, for a great conversation and for all the work you do.

Be sure to come back for more inspiring stories from young African leaders on the YALI Voices podcast.

Join the YALI Network at yali.state.gov and be a part of something bigger!

Our theme music is "E Go Happen," by Grace Jerry and produced by The Presidential Precinct.

The YALI Voices Podcast is brought to you by the U.S. Department of State and is part of the Young African Leaders Initiative, which is funded by the U.S. government.

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YALI Voices: We Are YALI Malawi with

Enelless Pemba [audio]

Please enjoy this special edition of the YALI Voices Podcast featuring Mr. Marshall Dyton as host. Marshall is the CEO of Freelance Web Solutions Malawi. He is also the founder and Editor-in-chief of Malawi Muslims Official Website. His areas of interest are to provide affordable web development, web design and related web services products targeting charitable organizations and Small to Medium Enterprises (SME) in Malawi. He is using skills gained in US during Mandela Washington Fellowship program to drive positive change in people's lives through technology. He approaches technology as a solution to most problems people face in their day to day lives.

Mr. Dyton interviews Enelless Pemba Phiri. Enelless is an arts and crafts entrepreneur. She uses arts and crafts to assist rural women and youth to gain economic security by making and selling environmental-friendly jewelry. She strongly believes that economic opportunity for women ensures real change in the world – when women have an income they reinvest in themselves and in their children's health, education and nutrition, hence building stronger families and communities. She is currently working with a group of 85 women in a semi urban area of Liwonde and is training them in arts and crafts. Enelless also utilizes the arts meeting times to discuss with the women other cross cutting issues like human rights issues and sustainable development goals.

Don't have access to SoundCloud, iTunes or Google Play? Read a transcript of the podcast below:

We Are YALI Malawi: Marshall Dyton Interviews Enelless Pemba Phiri

YALI VOICES HOST: Greetings, young African leaders.

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And if you like what we're doing here, take a moment to recommend us to all your friends.

Please enjoy this special edition of the YALI Voices podcast featuring Marshall Dyton, CEO of Freelance Web Solutions Malawi. Marshall is a 2015 Mandela Washington Fellow and in this edition of the "We Are Malawi" podcast he is interviewing fellow Malawian Enelless Pemba. Enelless is an arts and crafts entrepreneur. She uses arts and crafts to help rural women and youth gain economic security by making and selling environmental-friendly jewelry.

MARSHALL DYTON: Hello, I'm Marshall Dyton and welcome to the first episode of We Are YALI Malawi podcast. In this podcast we will be featuring different young Malawians who are making a huge difference in the Malawian society. These are the Mandela Washington Fellows, YALI Network members, and Regional Leadership Center participants. The podcast is produced by Premier Multimedia Consultants in Blantyre. But before I introduce my guest for today's show, I would like to talk a bit about the YALI program, especially if this is your first time to hear about it. The Young African Leaders Initiative was launched by the Unites States government as a signature effort to invest in the next generation of African leaders. The need to invest in grooming strong, resourceful

leaders comes out of the statistics that nearly 1 in 3 Africans are between the ages of 10 and 24 and approximately 60% of Africa's total population is below the age of 35. Who will empower and lead these young Africans? Who shapes the future of business and entrepreneurship, civic leadership and public management? In order to answer these questions, YALI promotes the models designed to identify and empower young leaders and these models are the YALI Mandela Washington Fellowship, YALI Network, and now the establishment of the Regional Leadership Centers across Africa.

So in this episode I have one of the brilliant young girls who have just been selected to attend the 2017 Mandela Washington Fellowship. Who is this young lady?

[MUSIC]

ENELLESS PEMBA PHIRI: My name is Enelless Pemba Phiri. What I'm doing is, I'm doing Anthu a Luso initiative. It's an initiative which I founded in 2014. I'm training women to do some crafting and art through recycled things and also through different ways of making art as a way of them to sell and make money for themselves.

DYTON: So I hear that you're one of the young Malawians who have been selected to attend the Mandela Washington Fellowship in the United States.

PEMBA PHIRI: Yes, it's true. I've been picked in the business and entrepreneurship track and I'm placed at New Mexico College in (New) Mexico and I'm super excited to be there because U.S. has been a place which has inspired me a lot. I've always dreamed of going to U.S. but I never thought even for a minute that I would have a chance to go there. So to me it's a dream coming true 'cause it's something that I've always wanted to be there. I know my life is not going to be same and I'm so excited. I feel like I should just fast-forward the time and we are in June already so I can go there. In fact, each and every day I'm thinking about U.S., I'm googling about the place where I'm going, so another part of me is already there. I'm so excited, I'm so excited – I really can't wait to get there.

DYTON: Why do you think you were selected because I understand there are so many people that applied this year?

PEMBA PHIRI: I can say it's because they just give me an opportunity, they just believed in me. They trusted in what I do and believed in my passion. Because at first I was just doing my art and my crafting as my passion, I was just following my passion. But I never had any idea that people are going to like that.

[MUSIC]

PEMBA PHIRI: So it's a lifetime opportunity and it's really an added advantage for me. I can't take it for granted. It's something, I'm going to use it with my all and my power and my energy to make sure that what I'm going to learn there, I'm going to impacting the people's lives, the people that I'll be working with.

DYTON: How did you receive the news that you have been picked?

PEMBA PHIRI: I was so, so, so happy. I didn't expect it but part of me was also expecting that so I was just in-between but I was so excited. I jumped up and down. I called everyone else, sharing the

good news. I was so happy to hear that I was selected.

DYTON: Now that you have been selected to go U.S. under this program, what should Malawians expect from you?

PEMBA PHIRI: When I'm back, first and foremost, I want to launch my Anthu a Luso initiative and start my first cohort whereby I will pick women all over Malawi and then bring them on one side and then train them in entrepreneurship by doing the crafting that I do.

DYTON: And what would be your promise that your dreams won't be just for two months or three months after you come back?

PEMBA PHIRI: Anthu a Luso initiative has always been my passion, has always been my dream, has always been my everything. I've planned it for a long time. I don't think it's something which, I can just, when I come back, it can just die like that. Because if it can die, it means it can die with me. But I want something which can at least stay there for the rest of my life so I will do that and follow my dream and fulfill it making sure that not only me but many women and youth are really getting a lot out of that, 'cause that's my plan and I don't want that to fade away just within a short time. I'll make sure that I work hard and I've imparted my skills which I've learned, making sure that everything else is just the way I want them to be.

DYTON: Mentioned that you tried and faced, but you were not picked, but then you had to try again and it's when now you have been picked, but there are others as well who have been trying maybe three times but they haven't been picked and now they say I think I will no longer try again. What would be your word of advice?

PEMBA PHIRI: For those people who applied and they were not picked up, what I can advise you is to not give up. Stay on your zone, do whatever you're doing as long as you are working hard towards your goal you can achieve it. Because you are not picked up does not mean that you are less priority than others. YALI is just an advantage. It's just an opportunity. So if you're not picked it's high time for you to work hard towards your goal and continue doing what you're doing by changing lives, making sure that things are changing in your community. And then when luck finds you, you can find out that you're picked next time by YALI. But don't give up. Always push on and work towards your goal.

DYTON: Indeed, not picked for YALI doesn't mean you're less important than others. It shouldn't be something that should hold you back from achieving your dreams. Also remember that there's still some rich opportunities on YALI online Network. There's several online courses from entrepreneurship to energy. All this are waiting for you. Thank you very much Enelless Pemba for that great interview. Let's meet again in another episode. Until that time, I have been your host Marshall Dyton. Bye bye for now.

YALI VOICES HOST: Thank you everyone for tuning into another YALI Voices Podcast and thanks Marshall and Enelless for a great podcast.

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YALI Voices: We Are YALI Malawi with Alfred Kankuzi [audio]

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Mr. Dyton interviews Mr. Alfred Kankuzi. Alfred is a Mobile Application Developer and Graphic designer. He has capitalized on people’s access to smart phones to make legal and health information easily accessible. He employs his skills in information communications technology to address governance and health issues as he believes many Malawians struggle to access quality legal and health information. He is passionate about the participation of citizens in matters of governance and their social well-being. He developed an app called Legal Wallet which has improved illiterate people’s access to legal information which includes the laws of Malawi and the legal aid service providers.

Don’t have access to SoundCloud, iTunes or Google Play? Read a transcript of the podcast below:

We Are YALI Malawi: Marshall Dyton Interviews Alfred Kamkuzi

YALI VOICES HOST: Greetings, young African leaders.

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Please enjoy this special edition of the YALI Voices podcast featuring Marshall Dyton, CEO of Freelance Web Solutions Malawi. Marshall is a 2015 Mandela Washington Fellow and today he is speaking with fellow Malawian Alfred Kankuzi, a Mobile Application Developer and Graphic designer as part of the "We Are YALI Malawi" podcast series.

MARSHALL DYTON: Right now, many people in Malawi and across African continent are spending their lives in jail, just because of ignorance. They've committed a lot of crimes, crossed several red-lines, just because they didn't know the side effects of what they were doing. This is because very few people have access to the constitution of their line, they don't know their human rights. In the end, ignorance has always been winning. But what happens when innovation meets ignorance? Join me in this second edition of We Are YALI Malawi podcast as I talk to an exceptional young Malawian who is trying very hard to defeat ignorance through innovation. His name is Alfred Andrew Kankuzi. This innovator has also just been selected to attend the 2017 Mandela Washington Fellowship in U.S.A. My name is Marshall Dyton, your host and thank you for downloading this podcast.

ALFRED KANKUZI: My name is Alfred Andrew Kankuzi. I'm an entrepreneur. Basically, what I do is like I develop mobile applications, I develop web applications. I also design things like related to health, like in terms of infographics. But for those people who also need extra services I do electronics also.

DYTON: So do you have a company, an organization, or just do this on personal basis?

KAMKUZI: I have a registered business known as [INAUDIBLE] Engineers and Consultancy Engineers & Consultancy. This is where software development takes place in terms of mobile applications, web applications and the microcontroller programming. That is we are able to come up with say electronics devices that we program them. We also have FREDAIL Designs where we do infographics and the graphic designing. So, far we have developed a couple of mobile applications ranging from health, governance, to entrepreneurship in terms of marketing. The first application in terms of marketing is known as Beza. Beza allows users to have access to unskilled laborers in Malawi. And the other application is Legal Wallet. Legal Wallet is a mobile app that connects ICT and governance. So it's like, Legal Wallet, so I'll explain to you the problems that we have in terms of governance in Malawi. Users are able to access the laws of Malawi, Legal Aid service providers, that is in terms of let's say law firms, legal rights. We also have short online legal services, that is in terms of gender-based violence, child rights, succession inheritance, family remarriage, property, all those are available there. And the other application is known as Malawi Art Up. Malawi Art Up is trying to connect Malawians, I would say Malawian artists, trying to expose them – expose Malawian artists to the outside world.

DYTON: I'm interested in the Legal Wallet app because I understand that the issues to do with governance are a big concern in our country. What made you to come up with this application?

KANKUZI: I discovered that one of the problems that people don't take it seriously in terms of ICT and governance, I will say governance in short. When it comes to the issue of law, many people do suffer. Many people do not know what to do and you find that many people do spend a lot and they become victims of circumstances. So it was because of these reasons that I had to sit down and think

o.k. what is it that makes it difficult for people to have access to the laws? What is it that makes people difficult to understand the laws? Then I discovered that we have, like, the language barrier. Many people are not interested in the law because the law is difficult to understand. It's only lawyers or someone who is in the legal field that understands the law. So with Legal Wallet, what I did was come up with a section, known as Summary Section where there is a summary of different sections, like they're in a language that a layman can understand – someone who hasn't done law, someone who is not in the legal field, has to get the concept of a particular section. And the other part is that I'm taking advantage of, I would say, mobile phones. Many people do have mobile phones in Malawi, meaning that if there are devices that people are close to, are mobile phone. So it's like a second can't go without a person having access to phone. I did take this advantage just because I know how people they've transformed bibles to put them in soft copies so that people can have a bible up and do all those kinds of things. So it's like with Legal Wallet, I took the very same technique, had to put all the laws in a mobile app so that when people are there like doing other things with their phone they can have time to go through the very same laws and know about two or three things.

DYTON: You're one of the young Malawians who have been selected to attend the Mandela Washington Fellowship in the United States. How did you get to know about the Fellowship?

KANKUZI: What I had to get information first from a friend who was a member of the YALI Network. But unfortunately he was not interested in continuing, I would say being the courses online, so that was, I think, a year ago. Then after going through the YALI Facebook page, website, and opportunity desk and some links, I discovered that YALI is something that I need to be part of.

[MUSIC]

KANKUZI: It's something that would shape my life, it would transform my life from one point to the other. I would learn more, like, from networking. Other people are doing different projects that brings impact to the world. So in terms of my selection to go to (the) USA as a Washington Fellow is something that I've been looking forward to because I'm looking forward to networking a lot, learning from people that is fellow Africans and people in the United States, understand and learn more in terms of culture, what other people are doing, how can I apply the very same techniques that people are doing in other nations to transform their society in the Malawian context now. So it's an opportunity that I don't think is a mere opportunity, it's something that I really appreciate.

DYTON: So how are you going to use this opportunity to transform Malawi?

KANKUZI: What will happen is like, when I come back home, it's not like I will stop it there. Because as I'm saying now there's already a project which is underway. So with the knowledge that I will acquire during the assignment and all the Fellowship processes, I will use that knowledge to advance more on what I'm already doing. And I will take that as an advantage because I will be able to know people who are doing similar projects with me. So with that advantage it means that I will be able to network with those people again.

Yes, it is true that when people go to YALI and come back it's only a few months you hear about them, then they are nowhere to be seen. Mostly I would say it's because there is a challenge in terms of networking. It's like each individual person is doing things on his own so it becomes hard to

see what effect that person is doing to their society because it's like he's doing things in the underground. But when people are to come together, let's say they go to YALI and come back and be united to work on particular projects that will bring an impact. And people know that, o.k., these people was there in YALI and now is back and people are doing – A,B,C,D – whatever to follow up, we're able to see. But as an individual it becomes that much harder.

DYTON: Yeah, I'm interested on that theme, on collaboration. Why do you think it's very important for the YALI Fellows in Malawi to come up together and do one thing as a family?

KANKUZI: When we come together and collaborate to just come up with one particular project which can have impact – a combination of different people's idea – the impact itself would be greater. The impact – and it will be easier for people to see the change. There is an advantage because people do share different skill sets. If I'm a software developer, someone is an artist, someone is into civic leadership, we all come together; what will happen is we are going to identify real life problems and we are going to come up with a concrete solution to that.

DYTON: Thank you very much Alfred for coming to our show and I wish you all the best as you prepare your trip to the United States.

KANKUZI: Thank you.

DYTON: That was Alfred Andrew Kankuzi sharing with us more about him and what he loves doing as he prepares his memorable trip to U.S.A. I hope we have all learned a lot from Alfred in this short interview. Until next time, I've been your host Marshall Dyton.

YALI VOICES HOST: Thank you everyone for tuning into another YALI Voices Podcast and thanks Marshall and Alfred for a great podcast.

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Thanks, everyone.

YALI Voices: Getting Energy to All Africans

Through Renewable Sources [audio]

Sub-Saharan Africa has abundant renewable energy resources. The question is how to tap into them and reach the goal of supplying everyone in each of its regions with reliable, clean and affordable electricity.

At the 2016 Young African Leaders Initiative summit in Washington, the State Department's Macon Phillips recorded a podcast with South African Mandela Washington Fellows Adele Boadzo and Tshegofatso Neeuwfan, who are both working to find clean energy solutions that could ultimately benefit the whole continent and help fight climate change.

In their discussion, Boadzo emphasized that Africa receives enough solar energy in one day to power the world for an entire year. Different African regions boast other renewable sources, such as wind, geothermal and hydro power. The barriers standing in the way of utilizing them can be overcome, she said.

Not everyone in Africa has electricity, and one of the biggest reasons is the lack of access in rural areas. "In order for us to get to these rural areas, we need to focus on distributed [generation] systems, which would largely use renewable energy systems," she said.

Consumers need to be convinced, and both Boadzo and Neeuwfan said there are good arguments pointing to reduced costs and health benefits from switching to renewable energy.

Neeuwfan advised proceeding with an energy mix that increasingly incorporates renewable sources, owing to the fact that renewables cannot currently supply the base load of power by themselves because the power they generate is still intermittent.

"What appeals to [consumers], I think, may be changing the narrative for renewable energy. You have to show the customer how renewable energy gets them what they want," he said.

Both Fellows studied electrical engineering to help prepare them for their careers, and they have big plans for the future. Neeuwfan hopes to start an enterprise that works on energy services and sees an opportunity to export some of South Africa's renewable energy expertise to other African countries.

"Through the YALI experience I've met some Fellows in other countries, and there are great opportunities to collaborate," he said, adding, "The region can benefit from the skills exchange and the ideas that we bring."

Boadzo is starting an organization called Hope Rises Solar. It will be focused on "distributing solar lighting equipment, and will do this by empowering female solar entrepreneurs" to sell the equipment, she said.

Listen to the full podcast to learn more about Africa's potential to take advantage of renewable energy sources.

Don't have access to SoundCloud, iTunes or Google Play? Read a transcript of the podcast below:

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

YALI Voices Podcast
Renewable Energy Innovation

[MUSIC PLAYING]

♪ Yes we can ♪
♪ Sure we can ♪
♪ Change the world ♪

[MUSIC PLAYING]

MACON PHILLIPS: Greetings, young African leaders. This is the YALI Voices podcast, your home for sharing the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative Network.

I'm Macon Phillips and I am so glad you've joined us today.

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If you like what we're doing here, please take a moment to recommend us to a friend.

I'm joined by Adele Boadzo and Tshegofatso Neeuwfan, two Mandela Washington Fellows from South Africa who are active in researching renewable energy solutions to climate change.

Both Adele and Tshego studied electrical engineering, and they both found themselves thrust into roles as young pioneering trailblazers entering the South African energy sector.

Tshego was driven by a sense of community service in his work to create opportunities for those who are beyond where the power grid reaches, exploring how solar power could be a better fit for customer needs instead of getting electricity the conventional way through fossil fuels.

Adele's interest in solar energy was born from personal tragedy. Her grandmother suffered fatal burns from an accidental gas cook stove explosion, a tragedy Adele believes can be averted with cleaner, safer sources of energy.

Let's jump right into my conversation on renewable energy with Adele and Tshego.

So I wanna bring us up to the sort of current day, and part of that, Adele, is kind of understanding the story of how you went from the factory doing shift work, getting dirty, and trying to learn the hard way — there was probably some shocks involved there and other types of things — but to what you're doing now, because I know did it by way of a consulting firm and another energy company and then actually you made another shift into the solar work. So can you just quickly touch on that path?

ADELE BOADZO: Yeah, so I spent about two-and-a-half years at the steel company, but at that time I had done quite well and I really wanted to move to the next stage, which was senior engineer, and the process to get there in that kind of environment is just "be here for five to 10 years" and that wasn't good enough for me. At the same time, during my undergrad I was quite excited about

renewable energy, so I started my master's in renewable energy projects whilst at the steel company.

So whilst doing my master's I looked around for employment and found consulting. I thought consulting to be a good fit because I'd now be exposed to a range of companies, a range of experts, and a new way of thinking because I was excited about renewables. I wanted to solve problems, but it doesn't – I wasn't fully getting that in my current job, but consulting really teaches you how to become a critical problem solver, communicator, and I thought that would be really great for my development. So I joined a consulting company, focused on power, oil and gas, and then finished my master's and realized that my passion is really in renewable energy projects. This is what I want to be doing. So then I moved on to a solar company. So I now run solar PV projects as well for South Africa's commercial companies, business companies, large farms, etc.

MR. PHILLIPS: So in that period when you were doing the consulting, that was beyond just South Africa, that was regional —

MS. BOADZO: Yes, that was regional.

MR. PHILLIPS: — Can you give us a 20-second lesson in what everyone should know about energy in Africa, because I would imagine that time you probably — you learned a lot on the factory floor about circuits and electrical engineering, and then it sounds like during this consulting work it was much more policy and academic and knowledge. So yeah, can you give us a little bit of that summary of what people should know about sub-Saharan African energy?

MS. BOADZO: So sub-Saharan Africa's filled with amazing and abundant energy resources.
If I think of my favorite one, solar, which is — so I keep quoting my favorite statistic. So we have from Africa one day of solar is enough to power the world for an entire year. So with that kind of resources, imagine what you could do. So we have different areas in the continent which has good, big specific areas. When you think of South Africa in terms of renewables, you're looking at solar and some wind. East Africa-side, you have geothermal, hydro. West Africa, you have solar as well. Central Africa: hydro. So we have all these resources, but it's currently — most of it is untapped. So there are quite a few barriers standing in our way, but I think we can overcome them. One of them is finances, political will and capabilities. For me those are the biggest issues that need to be overcome in order for us to actually tap into all our resources — as many of our resources as possible to electrify the continent.

Right now we only have about 70 gigawatts capacity for sub-Saharan Africa, and even that's quite a small amount because South Africa has about 50 gigawatts. So we have about 600 million people without electricity even though we have all these resources.

MR. PHILLIPS: Wow! And now you must have a perspective on that from where you sit in the national energy company. I mean, you agree with what she said? Anything else you want to add to that?

TSHEGOFATSO NEEUWFAN: Yeah, South Africa actually has 42 gigawatts, but I mean, it's significant — quite significant. And National Power Utilities supplies the majority of the power within South Africa and within the region. So the perspective is solar resources are great and we must integrate a whole lot more of them, but also like the utility still has a role to play in that it must

be a balancing, balancing utility that brings in other technologies to support renewables.

So the aim, I guess, with the entire thing, we must look at it from an energy mix perspective. The aim is to move towards low carbon growth future, right, but with renewables included because they're obviously like zero to very low emissions within the system. So renewables come in but they're intermittent. You'll have them sometimes, but sometimes not. So how do you support them also in low carbon growth way? And I think this was the work that I was doing within the National Power Utilities to say, what are the strategies that we can put in place to support renewables coming in in a low carbon growth way, and gas was one of the resources that we had identified to support renewables 'cause of its quick ramp up time —

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. NEEUWFAN: — and it has half the emissions of diesel —

MR. PHILLIPS: That's been a big story here in the United States.

MR. NEEUWFAN: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: And if you look at our decrease in emissions and our moving off of dependence on foreign oil here in the United States, that's in large part because of what we brought on board with natural gas, as well as with things like car emissions and other types of investments in solar and things. But looking over your backgrounds, both of you, it strikes me that you're working on a similar problem when it comes to renewable energy, but you're focused on the macro, sort of infrastructure behind the meter-type work and that you're —

MR. NEEUWFAN: In front of the meter.

MR. PHILLIPS: — Or in front of the meter —

MR. NEEUWFAN: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: Sort of the guts of the system, and that you're focused on the consumer side, so how do I actually get solar panels into people's hands. And so, you know, what I'd like you to do, if you can, is sort of talk about why you chose to go that way versus the other way. You know, let's try to kind of get you to comment on each other's because I think that's — when you think about the equation, they're both very valuable parts of the system, and you've kind of made a choice in each direction.

So we'll start with you, Adele. As you look at — you're in with the consumer side. What are some of the biggest challenges you see on the infrastructure side?

MS. BOADZO: So first I think of South Africa, we have one of the highest electrification rates on the continent. It's about 85 percent. And one of the biggest reasons we haven't been able to reach 100 percent is inability to get to rural areas, and this is 'cause we're using our coal power stations. And I believe that in order for us to get to these rural areas, we need to focus on distributed systems, which would largely use renewable energy systems.

So my focus is bringing renewable energy off-grid systems to rural areas to get us to 100 percent

universal electrification.

MR. PHILLIPS: But you're not waiting for the grid to be extended. You just wanna —

MS. BOADZO: Actually, for me it makes more sense financially to use distributed systems as opposed to waiting for the grid to be extended. There are some cases — well, most cases I found that it'll be cheaper to actually electrify some areas with off-grid systems instead of waiting for the grid.

MR. PHILLIPS: That's right. And I've heard this argument made in India as well. There's a huge push for off-grid solar there and, yeah, it is interesting — do you need the grid at all, if the technology can catch up? Yeah.

How about you? As you've said and look at the big system at a national level, what are some of the issues you feel like need to be addressed at the consumer level?

MR. NEEUWFAN: At the consumer level I think maybe just sensitizing the consumer to renewable energy.

MR. PHILLIPS: And what's your argument there? 'Cause in the United States — at least I arrive at this argument as we have to save the Earth because, you know, I have children, I'd like them to have, you know, a full healthy life. I worry that if we continue on this trajectory that the environment is gonna be affected in a way that's just, you know, awful. But that argument doesn't seem to win the day.

MR. NEEUWFAN: No.

MR. PHILLIPS: Sometimes it's the economic argument, and so then we get into the politics of the whole thing. So what do you think, at least in the South African context, to the extent you can extrapolate to a more regional argument, is the non-environmental economic argument for renewable energy?

MR. NEEUWFAN: I think for starters, I'll say — I'll talk about the economics now. For starters, I'll say like renewable energy technology has still not grown to a level where it can become base load, and base load meaning that it can be on all the time when the consumer needs it. So from a macro perspective, you still need a utility or something that supports renewables to be able to get to 100 percent availability. So that is from a first perspective, and that's one of the interests of the customer. The customer wants a supply all the time, regardless of where it comes from sometimes, and because of that desire they might subordinate climate change aspects of the case for renewable energy. But what appeals to them, I think, may be changing the narrative for renewable energy. You have to show the customer how renewable energy gets them what they want. So in the off-grid context you say renewable energy gets you what you want because, you know, sure there is a rollout program for electrification, but this thing can give it to you tomorrow and it'll be online and —

MR. PHILLIPS: So maybe renewable has a better availability —

MR. NEEUWFAN: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: — for people that don't have access to nonrenewable energy right now.

MR. NEEUWFAN: Absolutely. And on a level above that for people who are already electrified, the argument is persuasive if you show them how the cost of conventional supply impacts them. So for instance, coal-generated power obviously has associated health impact, which has associated health care costs. So does — is the user willing to pay for a supply that will ensure that they pay less and their kids are more protected?

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MR. NEEUWFAN: Could we pitch that kind of an argument to the mid-tier kind of consumer?

So you need to find those kinds of arguments to pitch to people, because needs in sub-Saharan Africa are different, and people will always tell you, "Oh, you want us to do climate change mitigation, but we're not really big emitters like America and China and India. Why don't you talk to those guys to make drastic cuts when we are the little guy and you want us to commit a lot?"

So we need to find nuanced arguments to persuade people to move to renewables and they need to make sense.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right. Sort of a "both and." The United States needs to continue the steps it has taken to reduce its emissions and make that transition, but there are additional arguments to your point about health —

MR. NEEUWFAN: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: — availability that really do emphasize the value of renewable energy. Do you have another argument you'd make on that?

MS. BOADZO: Yeah, just to add on that is South Africans, for example, when we look at the rural areas, if you say, "I'm bringing you solar energy," your argument is therefore you don't have to spend money on candles, you don't have to spend money on kerosene, which is also better for your health as well. When you go to households the case is, find that you have capital cost — this is going to save you money over time. This is a payback of 24 months and under — and this also means that you are independent from the utility. When the prices go up, you will not be affected by that. So that's the case they really wanna hear. They wanna hear that they're going to save money and that they can use their money on other things.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah, that's — I think that those are all very powerful arguments.

MR. NEEUWFAN: Yeah, and there's a third argument, like, you know, control over price Inflation.

MS. BOADZO: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right. So there's also availability but also stability.

MR. NEEUWFAN: Stability and then health care and all of these arguments.

MR. PHILLIPS: So this all sounds good sitting here in this hotel room in Washington, right, and we just heard Obama talk for a while about how change is possible and, you know, I wonder, though, when you get a good night's sleep and you wake up tomorrow and you continue your work a little bit

more sober about what's gonna happen, you know, what is your realistic expectation for the next few years, in both South Africa, but in the region? And what are some of the areas, in particular, you're going to try to focus on, not necessarily now, but when we check in in five years? What's gonna be the thing that you think is really taking up a lot of your time?

MR. NEEUWFAN: Yeah. I've — Can I go ahead —

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes, please.

MR. NEEUWFAN: I think, I've worked for the National Power Utility for a while, and I think over the past month or so I decided to go for the next stretch kind of opportunity. So I've decided to start my own enterprise that works on energy services, actually. So the intent with that will be to focus on the customers who are moving to Adele's space, behind the meter, focus on the customer and give them a better interaction with the electricity supply, give them more control over the cost of their electricity supply, and also introduce them to energy efficiency and its impact on climate change — all of these nice things.

But also, I think there's an opportunity to export some of the skills that we have in South Africa. So through the YALI experience I've met some fellows in other countries, and there are great opportunities to collaborate, and where I can add a bit of my skill to their experience and their skill and their knowledge to my experience, and we can make both a better product that is different from what is being provided at the moment.

And also, like, maybe this is unpopular, but you know, young black people need to get into a space where they think about starting their own enterprises in these spaces. You need more entrepreneurs, more entrepreneur skill — more jobs.

And customers. I think. are also thirsty for alternatives. and we need to understand how willing they are to put their money on those alternatives and what do those alternatives look like, 'cause the customer of the future wants to interact with the product better. They want to know if they can supply to you while you also supply to them. So concepts like zero net energy come into play, and the region can benefit from the skills exchange and the ideas that we bring.

MR. PHILLIPS: It strikes me — and then I'd certainly, Adele, I wanna hear, you know, the same forecast from you, but it strikes me the parallel — this may be kind of a reach — between political power and the power we're talking about, which is that the old paradigm was centralized and sort of one-way, a small group of people had the power that they then affected everyone else with. And the future that you're describing is power supplies that are much more collaborative, flatter, egalitarian, and as a result people are more invested in one another rather than being the recipients of some central place.

MR. NEEUWFAN: Absolutely.

MR. PHILLIPS: When we apply that to the political world, I think that's the trend that has everyone so excited, certainly filled with maybe more questions than answers, but it seems like a pretty optimistic way to see things, is that more people are going to have more of a role in how power is distributed.

MR. NEEUWFAN: And benefit from it.

MR. PHILLIPS: That's right. And benefit from it.

So how about you?

MS. BOADZO: So when I think of the big issues that will keep me up when I get back is, for one, awareness on the power of renewable energy projects and solar projects, specifically. So as an entrepreneur I'm still gonna be focusing on rural electrification, but there's still a lot of work to be done in terms of getting out there, showing people how this works, that it works, and that it's really going to save them money and save the environment. So loads of work needs to done on that.

And, added to that, on the implementation side, is bringing down the cost of this equipment. So whether I look at the solar kits or I look at off-grid electrification in villages, somehow those costs need to go down. And what we've learned in the U.S. is that scale, scale, scale is what really brings the costs down. When you have a state like California who has a target of getting to 50 percent renewables by 2030, solar is a big part of that. So that means you have X amount of solar on the grid, which is definitely going to reduce your costs. So we need to get to that point on the continent. So those are the issues I'll be focusing on.

MR. NEEUWFAN: Yeah, and seeing also Africa as a market that will also increase that scale, right, —

MS. BOADZO: Yeah.

MR. NEEUWFAN: — 'cause we sometimes when we speak about the scale of purchasing of renewable technology, like there's this focus on America, but America sometimes you see as a saturated market, but where is there most room to have impact, and I think Africa is —

MR. PHILLIPS: Absolutely.

MR. NEEUWFAN: — is the place.

MR. PHILLIPS: I mean, as someone who is very ignorant about some of the economics of this and some of the technical aspects that both of you know so much about, what I'm hearing is that there's this sort of counterintuitive situation we find ourselves in that is in the normal economic idea the greater the demand, the higher the price. But what you're saying is as demand and need is realized, that it'll actually drive down the price because it's a virtuous cycle. The more solar that's built out, the more investment goes into making those technologies cheaper and more available. So we're kind of at the beginning of something that might accelerate, which is really exciting.

So let me conclude here just by saying to everyone listening how they can keep up with you and connect with you. So why don't we hear from you first, Adele, on where are you on social or is there a website that people can find you at — how can they stay in touch?

MS. BOADZO: So I'm starting my organization called Hope Rises Solar. The website is still under construction, but it will be hoperisessolar.org, so you'll see that in a couple of weeks' time.

So my organization is focused on distributing solar lighting equipment and will do this by

empowering female solar entrepreneurs. So I have this vision of seeing a whole bunch of women across the continent selling solar equipment, being strong business-wise and technical-wise. So that's where I am.

MR. PHILLIPS: That's great. Are you on Twitter or Facebook or anything like that?

MS. BOADZO: I'm on Facebook, just not as an organization, but as Adele Boadzo.

MR. PHILLIPS: OK, so people can look you up. How about you?

MR. NEEUWFAN: Yeah, people can also look me up. I'm on social media. I'm on Facebook as Tshego Neeuwfan. And I'm also on Twitter. I've become — I'm tweeting more recently I think through YALI – through the YALI experience I'm tweeting more, and through those platforms I guess I'll keep publicizing what I'm doing professionally.

The enterprise we're starting — the naming has not gone through yet — through the process. So I'll publish that on the social media.

MR. PHILLIPS: OK, so people can look you up individually to stay in touch, but —

MR. NEEUWFAN: Individually to stay in touch, yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Well, I just wanna thank both of you for sharing your time with us today and wish you the best of luck in the weeks and months and years ahead.

Hopefully, we'll see each other again sometime. I'd like to come back through, but until them, take care.

MS. BOADZO: Thank you.

MR. NEEUWFAN: Thank you very much.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

MR. PHILLIPS: Thank you everyone for tuning into another YALI Voices podcast and a huge thanks to Adele and Tshego for taking time to talk with me.

Adele and Tshego are doing exciting work to bring clean, safe energy options to their fellow South Africans.

Each told me that making these strides and achieving success is made a lot easier by being connected with other young African leaders through the YALI Network.

Once again, if you'd like to reach out to Adele you can find her on Twitter at adele_hrs.

To reach Tshego, send him a tweet at tshego_vat_so. You can also visit his website at www.africagw.com

Be sure to come back for more inspiring stories from young African leaders on the YALI Voices podcast.

Join the YALI Network at YALI.state.gov and be part of something bigger.

Our theme music is E Go Happen by Grace Jerry and produced by her friends, the Presidential Precinct.

The YALI Voices podcast is brought to you by the U.S. Department of State and is part of the Young African Leaders Initiative, which is funded by the U.S. government.

Thanks everyone.

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YALI Voices: Life experience motivated his fight against drugs [audio]

(Courtesy photo)

Unfortunate events led Ghana's Felix Lanyo, who also goes by the name Felix Goodman, to live at a drug rehabilitation center even though he hadn't used drugs. He has since been working to use his experiences of homelessness, interactions with addicts, and political stagnation to help the youth in his country.

In the most recent YALI Voices podcast, Lanyo discussed growing up with a father who was a drug addict and whose habit and constant absence forced him to drop out of school. When Lanyo's mother remarried, his stepfather refused to help pay for his schooling unless he followed him and became an electrician. Refusing to do so, he was ultimately not allowed to live with them.

Searching for a place to live, he heard about a drug rehabilitation center run by a Christian organization and they agreed to let him stay if he entered their program.

"After I went to the discipleship program and I lived with the addicts, I realized most of them got onto drugs not by their own will. It's certain truths, certain refrains, and, sometimes, curiosity," he said. The experience led him to launch an NGO that helps young people overcome their drug addictions.

"One thing I've realized is much of the youth gets hooked on drugs, sometimes, through curiosity and ignorance. And then once they have their first try, the second time the guys realize they cannot get out of it," he said. His organization helps explain the negative impacts of drug use and offers alternative methods to help people overcome their personal struggles.

Lanyo's experience of hunger has also led him to start an agriculture project to help provide food for people on the street. The difficulty he faced in getting an education has motivated him to help

female child laborers get the schooling they need to improve their lives.

He also realized that many young Ghanaians are exercising their votes based on party allegiance or personality, rather than the policies and programs the politicians are advocating. Lanyo created the Ghana Youth Parliament House as a neutral space for people to meet, share ideas and present their solutions to the government.

In the podcast, which was recorded before Ghana's November 2016 general elections, he said: "My aim … is to bring every youth. It doesn't matter your political party you are coming from or whether you support — just come. Sit down. Let's solve our problem. What's our problems? Why are these things not going on right? Why is this thing like this?" So far, his initiative has spread to four regions in Ghana.

With all that he does, Lanyo said many are surprised to hear about his difficult background. "One thing I tell people is you don't put blames on people. You — you lead yourself. You learn to lead yourself first, before you can lead someone else. Because if you don't lead yourself, why — how can you really lead another person?"

Listen to the full podcast to learn more about Lanyo's extraordinary experiences.

Don't have access to SoundCloud, iTunes or Google Play? Read a transcript of the podcast below:

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE

BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAMS (IIP)

"YALI Voices Podcast:
Felix Lanyo (AKA Goodman)"
Transcript

[SINGING] Yes, we can. Sure, we can change the world.

MR. MACON PHILLIPS: Greetings, young African leaders. This is the YALI Voices podcast — your home for sharing the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative Network. I'm Macon Phillips and I'm so glad you've joined us today. Before we get started, don't forget to subscribe to the podcast on iTunes and Google Play. And visit yali.state.gov to stay up to date on all things YALI. If you like what we're doing here, please, take a moment to recommend us to a friend.

My conversation today is with Felix Goodman. Felix is a rising young leader and the founder of the Ghana Youth Parliament House, an organization dedicated to providing detailed information on candidates seeking public office. Felix also works in helping others combat their addictions to drugs, hoping to steer them on a successful, drug-free path. Now, without further ado, here is my conversation with Felix Goodman.

Felix, thanks for joining us today.

MR. FELIX GOODMAN: Thank you.

MR. PHILLIPS: And when you run into people and they say, "What do you do," how do you answer that question?

MR. GOODMAN: What do I do? Basically, I'll tell them how much I've been a blessing unto myself, how much I've coached myself, and then how much I'm helping and impacting hope and life into other people.

MR. PHILLIPS: Great. And so what does that mean on a day-to-day basis? What are some of the things that you're working on these days?

MR. GOODMAN: I've taken the YALI course. It's been a great thing. And it's built my leadership skills. And I run an NGO, actually. And many of the activities I do is with the anti-drug campaign. One thing I've realized is much of the youth gets hooked on drugs, sometimes, through curiosity and ignorance. And then once they have their first try, the second time the guys realize they cannot get out of it. And then they just build up like that.

So I've taken it upon myself that I'll make — I'll create awareness of drugs, so young folks and high school — especially like per se — should get a fair idea of what drugs is, and the kind of impact it brings us onto their lives, and the effects of how much it will drain them down. Some — I speak to some and they go, because I have break ups from some relationships, I have some family problems, and so I have just taken some drugs to feel OK.

Some say, because I'm depressed, I'm taking drugs to feel OK. But I ask them, are you going to be depressed forever? Won't the problem come back after you've taken the drugs? I said, after you're off, the problem is still there. So I'm trying to tell them that it's not the right way to get off your problems, but then there's another alternative which is better than that.

Because if you — for me, the main reason why I'm running this anti-drug program is my father was on drugs. Yeah. And he was never responsible. Yeah. So it has affected me in the long run because I fell out of high school. I couldn't complete high school because my father wasn't there for me. He left me when I had been 180 days. That was six months. He was never there for me again until I'm sitting here right now. And then he died of HIV and AIDS. So I know how it has to be on drugs. Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: And so you — he wasn't around growing up?

MR. GOODMAN: No, he wasn't at all.

MR. PHILLIPS: And that affected you a lot. You dropped out of high school.

MR. GOODMAN: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: How did you correct it? What was the — what was the turning point for you, where you sort of realized, for yourself, that you wanted to take it a different direction?

MR. GOODMAN: And then when I — sorry. When I dropped out of high school, I was actually a good student. I was actually a very bright student in school. And then I can probably say I was the best student in the class. I went in the school, after my registration, I never paid any fees anymore. Even though I wasn't on scholarship, the head teacher allowed me to be in school — through from Form I through to Form II, second term. He encouraged me to come to school.

But my bills were accumulating. It became too much that I fell out of school. When I came home, I saw it. I told myself, so does that mean it's end of me going back to school? Because I just realized I

was best among my colleagues in class. So would I end up somewhere else that they would even become a better person than I would be tomorrow? No, no. That's not me. I don't want to be that. I need to go back to school.

So I started pulling things together. I was trying and making some little gardening farms to get us some monies and go back to school. Some worked out, some — actually, it didn't go. I didn't get the funds to go back. I was trying scholarship opportunities. And my mom — my mom actually married to a different man, who was an electrician and he was into poetry, actually. So he never supported my idea of going to school.

He said I should become an electrician as he was. I haven't said an electrician is a bad job — it's a good job. But that wasn't what I wanted to do. I actually wanted to be in the classroom, go to school, and become someone. So he said, if I can't follow him up, then that's it. He can't pay my school fees. He can't take care of me.

And besides, I can't eat from the house because it's that electrician job that brings the money to the house. If I'm not following him, then I'm going to look for scholarships, and stuff, and have venues to go back to school, to the classroom. Then he was sorry. I thought he was.

MR. PHILLIPS: So you had a choice between either studying what he wanted you to study and having your education covered, or studying what you wanted to study and having to go figure it out on your own?

MR. GOODMAN: Yeah. Sure. So I took the — I took the challenge upon myself that, you know, for me, I would go to school. Whatever it means I pass to go to school, I'll go to school.

MR. PHILLIPS: OK.

MR. GOODMAN: So I was trying reaching some radio stations and putting my profile that people could help me get back to school. But, unfortunately, it never happened. Nobody was able to help me. And I've always been struggling to go back to school. And I can say, right now, I just started, on Monday, to Ghana Institute of Languages in French and Spanish. Yeah. And it's great. And I'm taking it from there.

And through all this time — that was around 2005 until now that I have always been dreaming to go back to the classroom. And that's encouraged me. I've done so many things. Because when I actually left home, my stepfather had a different apartment somewhere. And they were supposed to move. Because where we residing, at first, the rent died. So we were supposed to move. And he said, he can't — he actually told my mom to tell me that I'm not welcome in his new apartment.

So I — and I thought he was kidding, but — and my mom kept on repeating the same thing to him, you know, he says, yeah, he says this and that. OK. So two days until the day they move, I heard on the radio, once I was — I like — I love listening to a radio a lot. So I heard on the radio there was this rehab center. I didn't even hear it from the advert it was a rehab center. They were saying — talking about a discipleship program.

That they teach about the word of God and you become — and you continue to preach the word of God and teach other people. Of course, you get to a point. I was frustrated. I didn't know what to do.

So I was like, OK, I — because I wasn't so strong in reading the Bible. I don't know if I was even believing it. And I — I don't know. I was disturbed. So I wanted to do something. I was like, OK, why don't I go? Since I claim I'm a Christian, why I don't go, and study the bible, and then become a pastor or something?

That is even better than something. So I went. I think four days to they are moving, I went to check. And when I got there, I realized it was a rehab center/discipleship program. So I spoke to my mother. You know, seriously, I want to join. Because it was un-intensive.

So if there was something, you could home and come back. And I told my dad — my step dad told me I would have to move from the house. So I thought that would be an opportunity for me to even get a place to stay or to live. The main apostle said, OK, I'm welcome, if I can join the program. I said, OK.

MR. PHILLIPS: And that's what got you focused on the anti-drug area?

MR. GOODMAN: Yeah. That got for me. Because when my dad was on drugs, I didn't spend time with him. I actually saw my dad twice my whole life. And, you know, I didn't know how much the effect was until I went to the rehab. And so that's why I went, too, because I kind of had this bitterness in me against him. Like, yeah, he didn't take care of me. And I had that in me.
But after I went to the discipleship program and I lived with the addicts, I realized most of them got onto drugs not by their own will. It's certain truths, certain refrains, and, sometimes, curiosity. And the thing can just happen. And it just gets you. So I understood him and I was able to let go. And I forgive him. Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: And so it's been personally rewarding, in that sense?

MR. GOODMAN: Yeah. Sure. There was this guy in the program who actually also had a problem with his father. And I could — I felt that, no, this guy, you know, he doesn't even want to hear his daddy's name. So I called him to the side. And I never — I hadn't told him my story. So I called him to the side. You know, you haven't heard my story. You have to forgive people. I mean, you become free. And I told him my story. And from there, he was able to forgive him. And he became free and he's my friend now.
MR. PHILLIPS: Wow.

MR. GOODMAN: Yeah. So from — from that, it's been great. So I went to Chosen, I think — no, a day before I go to Chosen, I actually got a job. And that was a cleaning job at Commonwealth Hall. It's the west of the Ghana campus. So I went for the first day. And I booked in Chosen rehab that I would be coming. That was four days until my stepfather's moving. I will be coming. So the apostle allowed it. So I said, OK, I should come.

But I — and then, within that time — I applied to the job earlier, before I even went to Chosen, but they never called. But the moment I went to make enquiries that day at Chosen, they had called me to come to the job. So I went. And then the job, I started. I did the first day, the second day. I realized, no, I have to go to Chosen. So I went for the rehab and I went for the discipleship program. And I went through the program.

So when I came home, I realized that, you know, our community — a lot of young people, you know, in our communities, mainly, they start using their drugs through high schools. They go to school and

people are trying it. Some — some will take — like a friend takes it. And he's so smart. He's so brilliant. He can study hard. And all these things, it's not true. It's false. They're all lies. It doesn't happen.

And so you see a friend, he's so calm. And you say, OK, because I always want to become — I want to be like my friend. And you get to know that your friend is on drugs. And he will tell you, OK, come on, give it a first try. Just one try. That's all. And it's not only one try. And it's going to be continuous. It's going to be forever. And it becomes part of you. So that's it. And I– actually, I am the President and the CEO of Ghana Youth Parliament House.

This is because I realized the youth in Ghana, they– there's a problem with the youth because some of them will go to vote for a president or a candidate because they say he's so fine. He's a tall man, so I voted for him. Because my family, they always voted for this particular party, so I'm going to vote for that. And I realized, no, it's not supposed to be so like– before you vote for someone, you should even assess the person.

Like where he is coming from? What has he done? What contributions has he done? I mean, before you even want to become the president or get the position, you should– they should ask certain questions. You know, the youth of Ghana, we have to– we have to learn and question authorities. Like, why is this thing done like this? Why is this, too? OK. Why shouldn't it be done this way? Why can't it be done this way instead of always going through one root end?

And so I got an idea. I brought some people together– young folks together. They bought into the idea of like, oh, this is a great thing. And so I went to Parliament House. I met them and I spoke to them. And this is my idea. I think it's great. I think it's a good thing if we, the youth, can come up with our own parliament where you can come together and discuss issues concerning we. I mean, it's– they can– because, probably, they wouldn't even know what our problem is.

Because they are the highest, at the apex, they wouldn't know what is actually happening down there. So they need to hear from it as well. OK.

MR. PHILLIPS: So is the Youth Parliament– does it draw from young people around the country?

MR. GOODMAN: So what we are doing now is– they advised me– they gave me a letter to register it as a company, as an entity, so that we could– because, right now, the government doesn't have funds for that. So if we want to take on a program, we can search for funds to support. So because it's something that is going to be for the whole youth in Ghana, they thought it wise we should have it in every region. So we have 10 regions in Ghana.

So when, actually, I started there with the Accra one. And there's one on the Upper West, and there's one in the Ashanti region, and then the Central region. So we have four regions now that it's running in. Yeah. So that's really, very effective. So yeah. And aside that, I mean, it's agriculture. Because when I was with my stepdad, he– aside this electrician thing, he loved agriculture. And I farmed a lot. And I realized some of the benefits of, you know, farming.

And I've slept so much with hunger when I came out of– Yeah. So I know how it feels to be hungry. So I started this agriculture project. I just started it. Our youth and, let's say, 50% of charity give for people. I mean, to create food security for people. Because there are a lot of people on the street.

And they go to– they go to bed on empty stomachs. And it can make someone to go and steal. Because someone is hungry, he's not able to even think straight.

So if we could come together, and actually do something, and invest into agriculture, it would even decrease unemployment in Ghana. Because the unemployment rate in Ghana is bad. The youth unemployment is very high. So if I can even convince people– if I start and the youth see that this is flourishing, people will, actually, buy into the idea.

MR. PHILLIPS: That's great.

MR. GOODMAN: Man, it's going to help.

MR. PHILLIPS: That's great. So you're doing work in the anti-drug area.

MR. GOODMAN: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: You're doing work with the Ghana Youth Parliament.

MR. GOODMAN: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: What does the future hold for you? What do you– what do you want to do with those things, moving forward? Or are there other issues, too, that you're starting to pay more attention to? And then, I guess, how does this all fit into the election that's coming up in November? Do you think that's going to be something that really increases the energy, in terms of people's interest in these issues?

MR. GOODMAN: Yeah. Yeah. Sure. You know, I've– we were supposed to have a meeting, like a general meeting. I mean, let's say a regional meeting. And that was in the coming August. But the elections is coming on and there was this public relations officer in Ghana– the Parliament House. He called me. And he told me, no, he doesn't want to see– they don't want a situation whereby political parties will be taken advantage of this.

Because it's not a party affiliated organization, or something, or a platform whereby we say we belong to one particular party and they will have support– we will be supporting them. No, it's not that. We– we are neutral. Everybody comes, shares ideas, problems, and we find a way to get it solved. So we find a way to voice this out to the main authorities, so that we can get this solved.
And so he actually told me to put a halt on it. And so we canceled the meeting, which would be coming up, because the elections will be coming in November. And then Zita Okaikoi, which, actually, is in my constituency– she actually came for one of our meetings. And she was like, oh, yeah, that's good. So can she be coming more. And I could realize the– this thing– how they want to put it as in political And that is just not my dream for me this whole thing.

And that is not my aim. It is to bring every youth– it doesn't matter your political party you are coming from or whether you support– just come. Sit down. Let's solve our problem. What's our problems? Why are these things not going on right? Why is this thing like this? Yeah. It shouldn't be. Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: That's great. OK. So we're trying to wrap up each of these interviews with the same three questions, so I wanted to shoot them at you. And let's what you have to say. The first is, tell us

something about you that surprises people.

MR. GOODMAN: One thing about me that surprises people is when I tell people where, exactly, I come from– my background. And people are like, wow. People don't believe me. Yeah. People would think, because I became homeless.
No, that– that isn't me and that wasn't me. I don't know. There's this– and one thing I tell people is you don't put blames on people. You– you lead yourself. You learn to lead yourself first, before you can lead someone else. Because if you don't lead yourself, why– how can you really lead another person?

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah. That's right.

MR. GOODMAN: So you have to be strong in your mind and be your own leader first.

MR. PHILLIPS: So my second question is, do you consider yourself more of a morning person, early riser? Or are you a late night person?

MR. GOODMAN: I sleep late at night. I sleep very late. I'm a–

MR. PHILLIPS: You stay up late at night and sleep very late into the morning?

MR. GOODMAN: Yeah. My nights– normally, if I go to bed early, it's, let's say, around 1:00 AM. Yeah. That's early. Sometimes 2:00 AM, 3:00 AM, 4:00.

MR. PHILLIPS: And are there things you do every day or every week that you feel like are routines that help you be more organized and be more effective, in terms of achieving your goals? Are there tips or advice you would give to people?

MR. GOODMAN: Yeah. Sure. I actually– I speak to young folks, young people enough, especially in my community, where I live. I've led so many people. I have four girls– four, strong girls now– that I'm helping out. Yeah. And some were actually under child labor, which I've comforted them. I spoke to them. I'm like, why are you working for? I mean, they are very young. Some are very young. They are working and telling their stories.
And I said, I know it's not supposed to be so. And they said I've been harassed, sexually, and stuff. No, no. That's not– so they should pursue education. So I got them, I coached them. Yeah. I take them through. There's this one young lady who has been harassed sexually. Even though she's in child labor, I spoke to her. Because I don't have the money to, you know, carry her out and say, OK, I'm establishing you here, I told her, OK, you have to play your cards well.

I opened a bank account for her, so when she gets her money– she used to send the money back to the family– like the mother and the senior brothers are draining the money from her. And I thought, you know, you have to go school. Education is important. You have to get educated because that's one thing I realized– that if our women, you know, get educated, if they get enlightened, I don't– I think they– I will say it would change. Yeah.

Because there are so many kids lurching around. I mean, too much. Some are father-less. And look, all these problems will reduce if you're enlightened, if you go to school, if you're educated, if you know your rights. I mean, you can even– like question. Actually, a man– when a man comes into our life, you know what you're about. Yeah. And it will solve our problems. So if our women are tutored

well, they are taught, if they are well educated, if they go to school, and they know they're rights–

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah.

MR. GOODMAN: It will have impact on us because it's on them.

MR. PHILLIPS: That's great. So my last question– and this is really because we've been asking you so many questions– if you could ask a question to President Obama, what would your question be?

MR. GOODMAN: My question to President Obama would be, what would the future of YALI be when he leaves office? Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah. That's a good question. And, you know, we've talked about that some. And I think the future of YALI lies, in large part, with people like you, who are going to take initiative and make YALI something that works for them, in their own country. We'll continue to have these fellowship programs, we'll continue to have these leadership centers, but I think the real exciting part about YALI– the next thing– is going to be what young leaders come up with themselves that we can support.
And the other really exciting part is what President Obama's going to do after he's President because you know he's still going to be involved, somehow, in Young Leaders in Africa because it's just an inspiring– an inspiring time. So Felix, thank you so much for joining us today. Thanks, everyone at the YALI network, for tuning in. We'll have more interviews coming up soon.
All right. I hope you enjoyed my conversation with Felix. His story about how he took his father's addiction to drugs and turned it around into making sure others didn't follow that same path is remarkable. Thank you, Felix, for sharing your story with us. And thank you, everyone, for tuning in. If you want to connect with Felix Goodman, you can find him on Facebook. Spell his name F-E-L-I-X G-O-O-D-M-A-N. Felix Goodman.

Be sure to come back for more inspiring stories from young African leaders on the YALI Voices podcast. Join the YALI network at yali.state.gov and be part of something bigger.

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Our theme music is "E Go Happen" by Grace Jerry and produced by her friends, the Presidential Precinct. The YALI Voices podcast is brought to you by the U.S. Department of State and as part of the Young African Leaders Initiative, which is funded by the U.S. government. Thanks, everyone.

« YALI Voices » : pour ce fellow du Bénin, le développement des jeunes est un antidote à la violence [audio]

Il est important de s'engager pour une cause. C'est ce que pense Michel Okan. Et selon lui, plus on le fait tôt, plus on en comprend la valeur. Sa cause à lui, ce sont ses activités avec les jeunes dans le cadre de son travail : il s'efforce de leur donner accès à l'éducation, à des ressources et à des projets axés sur la stabilité de la société et la réduction du risque de leur implication dans des actes violents.

Une bonne cause peut solliciter de notre part un engagement à vie. « C'est comme si on ne peut que faire que ça. Je peux dire que c'est ce que je suis en train de faire, ce que je suis en train de devenir », explique-t-il à Caroline Groussain, du département d'État, dans un podcast « YALI Voices » en français.

Michel Okan s'exprime lors du Global Youth Economic Opportunities Summit de 2016. (Twitter)

Michel Okan, qui est béninois, a participé à la Mandela Washington Fellowship en 2015. Le programme permet d'améliorer les compétences en leadership déjà acquises ou d'en fournir à ceux qui en ont besoin. Mais il « n'est pas une fin en soi », estime-t-il. Il est important de se remettre en question pour s'améliorer continuellement et pour prendre davantage de responsabilités.

Pour lui, dans la pratique, cela signifie « travailler avec les jeunes de façon à ce qu'ils aient un état d'esprit d'indépendance, d'indépendance de penser, de faire et d'agir, mais pour la bonne cause ».

En septembre 2016, Michel Okan est intervenu au Global Youth Economic Opportunities Summit*, le sommet mondial sur les opportunités économiques pour les jeunes. Il y a discuté de la situation des jeunes qui vivent dans des zones de conflit et de l'importance d'anticiper les facteurs qui les mènent à l'extrémisme violent.

« La violence n'est que le résultat des frustrations, ce n'est que le résultat de ce qui est mal fait quelque part, par certains, par quelqu'un », souligne-t-il dans le podcast.

Même si les gens ne savent pas comment la violence commence, il est possible de savoir comment l'éviter, affirme-t-il. Pour cela, il faut travailler avec les outils déjà disponibles, tels la constitution et le processus démocratique.

« Ce n'est pas une responsabilité uniquement des hommes publics ; c'est une responsabilité de tout le monde, et ça part de l'éducation », insiste-t-il.

Pour en savoir plus sur Michel Okan, écoutez le podcast complet, en français.

Si vous n'avez pas accès à SoundCloud, iTunes ou Google Play, retrouvez la transcription du podcast ci-dessous :

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE

BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAMS (IIP)

"YALI Voices Podcast:
Michel Okan"

Transcript

Bienvenue à vous, chers jeunes leaders africains ! Vous écoutez le podcast YALI Voices, les voix de YALI. Ici, on partage avec vous certains des meilleurs témoignages de l'Initiative pour les jeunes leaders africains. Je m'appelle Caroline Groussain et je suis contente que vous soyez à l'écoute aujourd'hui. Avant de commencer, n'oubliez pas de vous abonner aux podcasts sur iTunes et Google Play, et rendez-vous sur yali.state.gov pour vous tenir au courant de l'actualité de YALI.

Aujourd'hui j'ai discuté avec Michel Okan. Michel est un ancien participant au programme Mandela Washington Fellowship. Il a 36 ans, il est diplômé d'économie et il est né et a grandi au Bénin. Mais c'est ailleurs, et sur une toute autre voie, que la vie l'a mené. Michel vit aujourd'hui au Mali, où il travaille pour la paix. Plus qu'un travail, la paix est devenue sa vie. Et c'est vraiment ce qui se dégage de lui quand on lui parle. La paix, le calme, l'humilité, mais aussi un esprit on ne peut plus déterminé. Comment les jeunes peuvent-ils apporter des solutions pacifiques aux problèmes rencontrés dans la société ? C'est une des questions sur lesquelles il travaille.

Mais revenons à l'interview de Michel…

CG : Michel, on est bien contents de vous recevoir ici aujourd'hui.
MO : Merci beaucoup.

CG : Donc vous êtes arrivé hier soir à Washington. Vous êtes ce matin ici avec nous pour ce podcast. Vous allez ensuite enchaîner avec le Sommet mondial sur les opportunités économiques pour les jeunes, le Global Youth Economic Opportunity Summit. Vous avez un emploi du temps de ministre ! C'est quoi ce sommet ?
MO : Ce sommet parle des opportunités économiques des jeunes à travers le monde et les griefs qu'ils ont, et quel apport de solutions, qu'est-ce qu'on connaît des jeunes, qu'est-ce qu'on ne connaît pas d'eux, et comment apporter ces solutions à certains de leurs problèmes pour la paix et le développement durable.

CG : C'est quelque chose sur lequel vous travaillez ?
MO : Oui, c'est quelque chose sur laquelle je travaille tous les jours. Je travaille au sein des Nations unies comme chargé de programme qui s'occupe des projets à impact rapide. Et c'est des petits projets qui sont mis en œuvre au profit des populations les plus affectées par le conflit. Moi, en tant que jeune ayant la chance de gérer ce programme au Mali pour les Nations unies, particulièrement dans le nord, je me vois dans la responsabilité de faire plus attention à la jeunesse en matière de paix et de développement.

CG : Comment vous êtes-vous retrouvé à faire ce que vous faites aujourd'hui ?
MO : Je n'avais pas imaginé dans mes activités en tant que travailleur pour les communautés impacter directement les communautés parce que je suis plus intéressé par les activités qui impactent directement les communautés, la population…

CG : En fait, vous avez fait des études d'économie, c'est ça ?
MO : Oui, oui. Donc je suis plus intéressé par ce genre de projets. C'est à dire, je vois les choses réalisées de la sorte que la population est bénéficiaire directement sur ça que des impacts indirects, c'est à dire que ça ne part pas d'une administration publique d'abord — je suis plus intéressé que la population soit bénéficiaire direct que ça. Mais je n'ai jamais imaginé que j'allais me trouver dans un

contexte où je vais gérer les projets pour la paix. Je n'ai pas imaginé. Même si je me suis dit une fois dans ma tête si ça arrivait, je vais pouvoir réussir mais je suis en train de le faire maintenant. Je crois que beaucoup de jeunes aussi veulent le faire.

CG : Mais votre expérience passée vous aide certainement aujourd'hui, n'est-ce pas ?
MO : Oui. Oui. Parce qu'avant d'aller même faire ça, j'ai travaillé sur les projets d'élection, pour une élection au Bénin. Je vois comment les élections, comment c'est important pour la paix parce que la prévention des conflits passe aussi par l'élection. Je prends le cas de mon pays en 2011, peu s'en fallait, à cause de l'outil qui allait servir pour une bonne élection pour une bonne élection, peu s'en fallait. Aujourd'hui tout le monde est fier d'être Béninois parce qu'au moins c'est une démocratie et la population a accepté les résultats. C'est une fierté.

CG : En parlant d'élections, justement, comment est-ce qu'on peut empêcher la violence liée aux élections ? Qu'est-ce que vous conseillez aux gens qui n'acceptent pas les résultats du scrutin ?
MO : C'est de tout faire pour qu'on y n'arrive pas, comment faire pour ne pas arriver là. C'est ça qui est plus important. Parce que la violence n'est que le résultat des frustrations, ce n'est que le résultat de ce qui est mal fait quelque part, par certains, par quelqu'un. Ce que je vois c'est, comment faire pour ne pas arriver là ? Parce que, quand ça commence… On ne sait pas en réalité comment ça… J'observe que les gens ne savent réellement pas comment ça commence. Mais on sait comment faire pour ne pas arriver là. Mais pourquoi ne pas utiliser ce qu'on sait ? Et c'est ce qu'on ne sait pas ce à quoi on veut toujours s'attaquer. Et ce qu'on sait, on parle des institutions, dans certains pays, constitution, la démocratie… tout ce qu'on sait autour de ça. On sait tout ça, là. C'est de faire ce qu'on sait pour que — pour qu'on n'y aille pas, au lieu de s'attaquer à ce qu'on ne sait pas. Tout le monde connaît la paix. Mais on ne veut pas utiliser la paix. On veut aller à la violence. C'est un état d'esprit et cet état d'esprit doit être manifesté dans tout ce qu'on fait, à tous les niveaux. Ce n'est pas une responsabilité uniquement des hommes publics , c'est une responsabilité de tout le monde, et ça part de l'éducation. Le contexte dans lequel tout homme dès qu'il est né, je parle d'homme grand ''H'', le tout contexte dans lequel on lui transmet certains acquis culturels qui perdurent, qui déterminent sa vie, du début de sa vie jusqu'à la fin de sa vie, il faudrait intégrer des éléments qui le préparent, ce qui lui fait accepter la paix, qui le fait manifester la paix…

CG : Une éducation dès l'enfance…
MO : Oui, l'éducation, de façon globale.

CG : Puisqu'on parle d'éducation, qu'est-ce que vous avez appris au sein du programme Mandela Washington Fellowship. Quel impact le programme a eu sur vous ?
MO : Le programme a renforcé ce que je suis en tant que jeune. C'est comme si je me retrouve à avoir pris un engagement au vu et au su de tout le monde, devant des grands regards. Un engagement pour aller jusqu'au bout d'impacter positivement le monde. Et je dois tout faire pour le réussir. C'est comme si j'ai pris le chemin de non-retour pour impacter positivement.

CG : OK. Grande responsabilité !
MO : Grande responsabilité. Donc c'est comme tu portes une étiquette et tu dois tout faire pour la mériter, pour la conserver. Parce qu'on te cite comme exemple pour d'autres. Donc tu n'as plus le droit, tu n'as plus intérêt à faire chemin — demi-tour par un manque peut-être en faisant face à des difficultés au quoi… .

CG : Et le YALI Network, est-ce que vous pourriez nous donner un exemple d'activités auxquelles vous participez ?
MO : Je participe vraiment à des activités d'échange avec les jeunes, partage d'information, formation. La preuve est faite, quand j'ai parlé aux jeunes, je leur ai parlé de l'opportunité de YALI. La limite partagée par tous les jeunes, c'est l'anglais. Moi je leur ai dit, moi je suis né au Bénin, j'ai grandi au Bénin. Je parle l'anglais moyennement qui me permet de me faire comprendre, de comprendre les gens quand ils parlent. Je n'ai pas été dans un pays anglophone étudier l'anglais. Je leur ai dit – beaucoup d'entre eux ont actuellement là 18 ans, 20 ans. C'est 35 ans la limite de YALI. Il faudrait qu'ils saisissent cette opportunité, en pensant que le YALI va continuer, tout autre programme comme fulbright va continuer. Donc de saisir cette opportunité de renforcer leur anglais à partir de maintenant en disant d'ici deux ans, trois ans, je serai bon en anglais pour pouvoir saisir les opportunités. Et là, ça a généré un programme de formation en anglais que je donne aux jeunes avec un collègue qui s'appelle Daniel Massamba. On forme les jeunes de Gao en anglais jusqu'à aujourd'hui. On forme les jeunes.

CG : Ça vous paraît important de s'engager pour une cause ?
MO : C'est très important de s'engager. Si on s'engage un peu plus tôt, on connaît plus la valeur. Non seulement on connaît l'importance, mais aussi ça devient la vie qu'on vit. Et ça n'a plus de différence, c'est comme si on ne peut que faire que ça. Je peux dire que c'est ce que je suis en train de faire, ce que je suis en train de devenir.

CG : Quel message aimeriez-vous faire passer aux jeunes du YALI Network qui ont envie de faire bouger les choses ?
MO : Bon, je vais parler comme tout le monde, je vais leur donner du courage. Mais, je vais aussi dire, être YALI, avoir participé au programme YALI n'est pas une fin en soi. Parce que moi je comprends, c'est un programme soit qui t'améliore par rapport aux qualités de leadership que tu as, ou bien qui te donne des qualités de leadership que tu n'as pas. N'importe lequel des cas, quand tu as participé à YALI, ça ne veut pas dire que tu ne vas jamais te remettre en cause sur certaines qualités que tu n'as pas encore qui te permettent d'avoir un bon emploi ou bien qui te permettent d'avoir ce que tu veux. Ça ne veut pas dire que les gens n'ont pas…, je ne suis pas en train de dire que les gens n'ont pas ces qualités ou bien qu'ils ne font pas de leur mieux. Mais il ne faut pas se dire qu'on a déjà assez fait, qu'on ne doit pas s'améliorer. Il ne faut pas aussi se dire, bon parce que je porte l'étiquette YALI, c'est déjà suffisant pour que les gens me considèrent à tel poste ou bien à telle responsabilité.
CG : C'est à dire ? Aller sur internet… ?
MO : Oui, aller sur internet, aussi, c'est un état d'ouverture d'esprit qu'il faut plus accepter. Je parle, parce que, ce n'est pas tous les jeunes de Gao, c'est vrai. Je vais citer un exemple : l'année passée, une de mes activités qui consistait à rassembler les jeunes et à leur parler, et à renforcer leur leadership et consort, j'ai choisi un thème au moment de la période des candidatures de YALI pour les motiver à postuler au programme YALI et au même moment préparer leur esprit à être ouvert pour d'autres opportunités car ce n'est pas YALI seul qui va leur permettre d'être un leader dans leur communauté. Donc j'ai partagé mon expérience avec eux, avec des collègues. Ça ne m'a pas choqué, la réponse d'un jeune, un des jeunes leaders, qui disait oui, tout ce que j'ai dit, que c'est vrai, la jeunesse de Gao, ils n'ont pas besoin de ça, ils n'ont qu'à vivre leur vie ici et… pour dire de façon ramassée, lui, il n'est pas pour. Il y a plein de ces gens comme ça qui influencent les jeunes comme ça, pas uniquement à Gao, mais c'est partout. Et si je vais faire une autre recommandation,

c’est de travailler avec les jeunes de façon à ce qu’ils aient un état d’esprit d’indépendance, d’indépendance de penser, de faire et d’agir, mais pour la bonne cause, pour la bonne cause. Heureusement après, beaucoup de jeunes sont venus vers moi, même certains sages qui ont participé à l’activité. Ils m’ont encouragé, ils m’ont dit de ne pas faire vraiment attention à ce que le jeune là, il vient de dire, qu’il ne comprend pas encore et il aura le temps de comprendre. Et ce qui a confirmé effectivement que les jeunes ont compris, une semaine après cet atelier de motivation en leadership, YALI et consort, mon téléphone sonne – il dit : « Oui, Monsieur Michel, on voudrait te voir, on voudrait que tu participes à une réunion le dimanche prochain ». Je dis : « Quelle réunion ? » Ils disent ils ont créé un club qu’ils ont appelé YALI à Gao. Donc c’est comme ça, le club est lancé et le club fonctionne jusqu’à présent.

CG : Garder un esprit ouvert et une indépendance de pensée et d’action, on va s’arrêter sur cette note positive. Merci beaucoup Michel d’avoir pris le temps de répondre à nos questions. Et on vous souhaite une très bonne semaine aux États-Unis.
MO : Je ne vais pas finir cet entretien sans remercier tous les gestionnaires de programme, YALI, le gouvernement américain, tous les autres jeunes, toute cette organisation qui m’a permis d’être ici, vous aussi, tous ceux qui contribuent de près et de loin au programme de YALI, tous les autres jeunes, je salue tout le monde. Je vais tenir mon engagement, je tiens mon engagement.

CG : Bonne journée à tous.

J’ai passé un très bon moment en compagnie de Michel. C’est vraiment une personne qui a beaucoup de qualités, qui comprend le sens du service public et qui sait saisir les opportunités de networking offertes par YALI.

Encore merci à Michel d’avoir passé un moment avec nous pour partager son expérience. Revenez sur YALI Voices. Écoutez nos podcasts avec des jeunes leaders africains et laissez-vous inspirer par leurs expériences.

La musique de notre générique “E – Go Happen,” est composée par Grace Jerry et produite par Presidential Precinct. Les podcasts YALI Voices sont produits par le département d’État des États-Unis dans le cadre de l’initiative YALI pour les jeunes leaders africains financée par le gouvernement des États-Unis. Merci à tous.

YALI Voices: You're not born with self-confidence. You build it, says Ugandan entrepreneur. [audio]

(Courtesy of Jamila Mayanja)

Jamila Mayanja started her working life by boldly approaching a prospective employer and telling

him she could do anything his company required. “Teach me and I will learn it in 30 minutes,” she said.

It was an unusual move for a woman in Uganda, where “the survival mode is be beautiful, get ready for marriage, stay in marriage, be respectful,” she told the State Department’s Macon Phillips in a YALI Voices podcast.

The 2015 Mandela Washington Fellow went on to found Smart Girls Uganda, where she empowers young girls and women through training to build their self-esteem.

Many have the impression that self-confidence is something you are born with. “No, you can actually build it,” she told Phillips. Her passion has been to encourage girls to pursue their dreams and create their own initiatives.

Mayanja shared a funny story about how her aversion to doing laundry led her to start a franchise company through Smart Girls Uganda called J Mobile Laundry Services that is helping to address women’s unemployment in Kampala. With the help of the YALI Network, she plans to open the country’s first laundromat, consulting with other Mandela Washington Fellows to make it environmentally friendly as well as incorporate it into her training center, where women are planning their own businesses.

“Everything is quite YALI-branded,” she said.

Learn more about Mayanja and her remarkable achievements, including the Haven Anti-AIDS Foundation she co-founded to empower youth in the fight against HIV/AIDS, illiteracy and poverty.

Don’t have access to SoundCloud, iTunes or Google Play? Read a transcript of the podcast below:

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE

BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAMS (IIP)

“YALI Voices Podcast: Jamila Mayanja”

[MUSIC PLAYING]

♪ Yes we can. Sure we can. ♪
♪ Change the world. ♪

[MUSIC CONTINUES]

MACON PHILLIPS: Greetings, young African leaders. This is the YALI Voices Podcast, your home for sharing the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative Network. I’m Macon Phillips and I’m happy to have you here with me today. Before we get started, don’t forget to subscribe to the podcast on iTunes and Google Play. And visit YALI.state.gov to stay up to date on all things YALI. And if you like what we’re doing here, take a moment to recommend this all to your friends.

Today, I’m joined by Jamila Mayanja. Jamila is the CEO of Smart Girls Uganda, a company that not only trains women and girls in entrepreneurship, but also in life skills, to empower them and build their self-esteem. In addition to that, Jamila created a franchise company, founded an organization

that sensitized youth about AIDS, and organized Uganda's first father-daughter dance to showcase the importance of fathers in their daughters' lives. Now, my conversation with Jamila Mayanja.

So hello everybody. This is Macon Phillips. I'm here in Washington, DC, with Jamila Mayanja, who is a 2015 Mandela Washington Fellow, but has come back to the United States for an entrepreneurship conference that we'll hear a little bit more about. Really excited to have you here in our offices here at the State Department. Welcome. It's good to have you, Jamila.

JAMILA MAYANJA: It's good to be here. I'm so excited to meet the YALI Network people behind the scenes.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yes — see the actual sausage being made, as it were.

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah. It's so cool.

MR. PHILLIPS: And we are really excited to have you here because there is oftentimes this distance, geographical and —

MS. MAYANJA: Huge distance

MR. PHILLIPS: — and otherwise, yeah, that we want to have this relationship with young leaders across Africa and we've developed a program that has this exchange program that brought you here, that has the Regional Leadership Centers in Africa in a number of different locations — Dakar, Accra, Nairobi, Johannesburg. And we also have this virtual network, the YALI Network. And each of these areas has been really exciting, but it's sometimes difficult to really keep that connection when a key part of the relationship is so far away.

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah. That's so true.

MR. PHILLIPS: So it's nice to have you here in person.

MS. MAYANJA: I'm so happy to be here.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah. How long have you been in the States this time?

MS. MAYANJA: Just a week.

MR. PHILLIPS: This is your — is this your second time? Was the Mandela Washington Fellowship your first time in the United States?

MS. MAYANJA: Yes, actually, yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: So this is one of the things that I'm always curious about, which is as someone who had never been to the United States before but probably paid attention to it and was interested in it, what was the biggest surprise to you, you know, getting off the plane at the airport and kind of spending the first few days here?

MS. MAYANJA: The biggest surprise was the fact that there were homeless people in the United States. People don't actually believe it back home, but there are actually homeless people in the United States. They actually were in the streets begging. When we were in Dartmouth, when they

took us for the community service, which is the best thing I think that YALI does for the community service, there are actually people who starve. So it is amazing to see some of the problems that happen in Africa actually happen in the United States. And also there were jobless people, people who were looking for jobs. Now that bit me off. I thought everybody in the U.S. had a job.

MR. PHILLIPS: Now, one of the things that you may not know about me is that I actually lived in Norwich, Vermont —

MS. MAYANJA: Oh, yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS:—which is where Dartmouth — it's across the river from where Dartmouth is.

MS. MAYANJA: We actually visited Vermont.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah, and so Dartmouth University is a great school that's located in Hanover, New Hampshire. And as part of your Mandela Washington Fellow experience, you spent six weeks there with 24 other young leaders.

MS. MAYANJA: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: And in 2002, I lived in Norwich, Vermont. And what brought me there was being in AmeriCorps VISTA. And AmeriCorps is a program that actually works on poverty in the United States. And so I spent my time working with young children who lived in government-funded housing projects in that area. And we actually would find students at Dartmouth and match them up as mentors to these young people so they had a good example of what to do. So I actually know the issue of poverty in the Dartmouth area firsthand and I can confirm that has been the case for quite a while.

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah. It was amazing. I really loved what Dartmouth did for us, for all the charity work that we did there, visiting the different people who wouldn't survive in winter, visiting with people who didn't have access to food. It was quite amazing. Then we visited a city called Burlington, I think.

MR. PHILLIPS: I lived in Burlington for four years.

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah, and there were so many homeless people on the streets. And you'd think those things wouldn't happen in that, like, powerful United States.

MR. PHILLIPS: Well, why do you think it does?

MS. MAYANJA: I think it's the world. We are all the same people, and not everybody has the same status. Like, you think you live in — we—the world is like one bubble, one — actually one bubble. You'd think there is nobody who is higher, who is better. Every part has its own challenges and—yeah, actually, every part has its own challenges. So it's the way — how we overcome them, and in Uganda how we also try to make sure we overcome them. So you'd think there's no perfect place, there's no perfect bubble. It's how people actually work out their problems in whatever part of the world they are in.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah, that's right. That's — I couldn't agree with you more.

So let's use that as a jumping off point into your own life. And you talk about, it's not about the circumstances you're in but how you respond to them, how you overcome those challenges. And you've certainly become quite an accomplished entrepreneur and a leader, someone who's quite inspiring to Americans, to Ugandans, to girls, to —

MS. MAYANJA: Oh, wow.

MR. PHILLIPS:—to people trying to clean clothes, and all the way to the president of the United States. And we'll get to that in a second. But I imagine it wasn't always that glamorous and awesome.

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Tell us a little bit about where you are coming from and how that's something that's motivated you.

MS. MAYANJA: I come from a family of 14 brothers and sisters. My dad had three wives. My mom was the second wife. And later, my dad died in my first year, first semester. And when he died — he was quite an amazing guy. I always was quite — quite wondered how he took us all through good schools, the 14 kids. And he actually had more kids he was looking after. So I was quite amazed at how that one man managed to do all that. Good kids and we still got fed. But when we lost him in — first I lost my real mom when I was in S3 and now I stayed with my amazing other mom, who is the heart and body and soul of everything that I breathe right now. But the biggest challenge was losing my dad in my first year, first semester at campus. He had just taken me to a very expensive university, that was Makerere Business School, and a very expensive hostel. And there he dies and the money just somehow disappeared. I really had to survive. And I noticed—I couldn't try and get back to my mom, tell her, "You know what"—because she also was depressed. How is she going to take care of all these other kids?

And I think that motivated me. But even before that, when I was in school, I was in an all-girls school. I lived with girls that came from, like, all different backgrounds, and I somehow would pull them towards me. I would always give a listening hand. I was on every cabinet of every club in school. And I even started, I remember, an AIDS club that later I called the Red Ribbon Club because when I called it the AIDS Club, nobody actually came to the first meeting. So I had to rebrand it. They kept on saying, since I called it the AIDS Club, it's only people with AIDS. Yet I just wanted to show these people because they're young, they can get AIDS. So when I rebranded it, so —

MR. PHILLIPS: That's a — let's just dive in on that for a second.

MS. MAYANJA: [LAUGHING]

MR. PHILLIPS: I think that's a really important lesson is that sometimes the way you present something –

MS. MAYANJA: Exactly. Exactly.

MR. PHILLIPS:—is really, really important. So I think that's a good takeaway for people who want to — if you want to fight AIDS and you want to focus on that issue, maybe don't call your mission the

AIDS Club.

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Maybe think of a much more interesting way to approach that.

MS. MAYANJA: [LAUGHING] I remember sitting in the classroom for my first meeting after putting up flyers and everything, because after being on every cabinet of every club, I wanted something of my own that I've studied in school. And I was there alone, literally. Not even my best friend came. But later, when I talked to the [INAUDIBLE], it's like, maybe it's the name. And then I went to lead a survey and asked the students, "Why didn't you come to my meetings?" Like, "My dear, there's a rumor going around that you started the AIDS Club because maybe you have AIDS or you're actually looking out for AIDS people, people with HIV/AIDS, and it's going to make us so unfamous." So I went back and rebranded.

So I think my zeal to try and create different, to try and be different, was from school.

MR. PHILLIPS: I think that there's also another lesson in that, leaving aside the branding itself, it's something that the American technology sector is really focused on right now, but in general, which is this idea of really understanding your target audience, I mean, really actually understanding your mission, what you're trying to do, addressing a certain issue, but having the humility and the curiosity to actually talk to the people you're seeking to motivate and ask them what they think of it and then design something that meets their needs. And I think too often — and I say this as someone who's seen this a lot in the U.S. government and other places — we all sit around and try to cook up what we think is going to be great without talking to the people we're trying to reach in the first place. And that kind of feedback is really important at all steps of an organization, whether you're doing a high school club or you're trying to start a business or otherwise. So I think that's a really important lesson for people to take away.

MS. MAYANJA: Thank you. And I think also that bonded my relationship with the headmistress of my high school, and whatever program I bring to the school, I'm always welcomed with open arms, yeah, because I left a huge impact in the school. And later, as much as I also later a club still—also the A-level counselor. So I was literally always someone's, like, mother all over the school. And also the teachers themselves and even the staff — right now I go back and I start working from the gate.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right.

MS. MAYANJA: Which is very cool. But all that, when I reached campus, really kind of faded away when I lost my dad. I thought when I would leave high school, I would still carry on what I was doing back in school, but I couldn't now. I moved into survival mode. I had to survive because now I had really nothing. I was glad that my uncle, like, my dad's brother took up to pay my tuition. But that's all he could do. I had to look for upkeep.

So, one of these days — I woke up one day and I was like, "Let me go and look for work." I walked into someone's office, my first boss ever, the first job I've ever looked for. I told him, "I can do anything that what your company is doing. Teach me and I will learn it in 30 minutes." And he was amazed this young girl who is in first year. She doesn't even have any papers and I'm telling him that. He's like, "First, have these flyers and go down there and try and get 10 clients. If you get 10

clients, actually more than 10, you have the job." And I got them in, I think, two hours. When I got them in two hours, he's like, "Sit down, let me teach you the software," and I learned it in 15 minutes. He was amazed. Then he made me the receptionist and the sales girl.

And from that day on, I kept on climbing ladders in his company and helping grow his company. But still when I was in that company, I wasn't satisfied. I would always volunteer, go volunteer in stuff that are organized by the U.S. Embassy. I co-founded an organization that now I'm a board member of, called Haven Anti-AIDS Foundation.

I was never satisfied when I was doing, like, business for my former boss because — later, in my third year, he promoted me to being marketing manager of his company, but even when he was — he wasn't doing any corporate social responsibility. It's me who introduced it there. To say it, I was never satisfied as much as now I was able to look after myself, give some more money to my mom so that my siblings can go to school. It was never really satisfying in my heart. I did a lot of back and forth courses to improve myself in being a counselor, in being a trainer online.

So, in 2012, before I — after I graduated, I decided to quit my job. My mom was in shock. [LAUGHING] She told me, "Are you crazy?" And I'm like, "I'm not crazy." She told me, "But you are getting money; you can look after yourself. You don't need anyone." I'm like, "But I'm not happy." As much as I loved my work so much — because later, the guy who had set up the company, we had built it so much, he sold it for so much money, and my new bosses were also amazing, but I was never literally fully satisfied. And I remember, she almost — in Islam, we call it a dua. She almost did for me a dua to stay and to actually change my decision. And I told her what I was going to do. She told me, "But you're already giving back in your own way." I told her, "I'm not happy."

So I started Smart Girls Uganda after that. I noticed even when I was at my company, I always had girls around me, talking to girls. I liked — I felt bad that even the girls I was working with didn't have enough confidence to speak out, to chase for their dreams. I met so many brilliant girls who couldn't get out of the job market to start and create their own initiatives. So I was, like, let me start Smart Girls Uganda to empower girls in all aspects of life.

MR. PHILLIPS: You don't strike me as someone who has that problem yourself.

MS. MAYANJA: I had it when — somehow all the things I did, I was kind of hiding my self-confidence issues a bit, because being in a big family, you tend to try and close yourself. So I would use cool to try and build my own confidence. I didn't know that in the things that I was doing, I kind of was building my own confidence in a way, I think.

MR. PHILLIPS: And so what do you take away from your own style and your own background as you're trying to grow the capacity of these young girls to be as confident as you are? What's the quality you're trying to pass along to them?

MS. MAYANJA: The quality mostly is don't be afraid to accept that maybe you have loss of esteem and you can build it yourself. People say having self-confidence is — you're actually born with it. No, you can actually build it. And don't be afraid to fail, to get up. Don't be afraid to use the problems in your life to actually push you beyond your own capacity.

MR. PHILLIPS: Are there any tricks or any sort of very specific tips that you have for people who are

struggling with their self-confidence? You know, look in the mirror and yell at yourself —

MS. MAYANJA: [LAUGHING]

MR. PHILLIPS:—and say, “You’re great!” or whatever? You know, what are some tips and tricks you tell people?

MS. MAYANJA: Oh, you are so cool. What I used to do at school, whenever I was walking to class, I’d say, “Hi Jamila. You are amazing. Oh my God!” [LAUGHING] I’d literally shout a hallelujah for myself when I was walking. And then I would tell people, “You know I’m amazing?” Like, I would literally stop people and, “By the way, seriously, I’m so cool. I can’t even believe myself.” So, I would assure myself by telling other people. And people believed it, like literally. And in the morning, whenever I would wake up, I don’t wake up myself by grueling. I wake up to, “You’re amazing Jamila.” So I would give myself those things I felt other people did have.

I remember I’ve always been, what in our country would say small. I was always bigger than the people in my class. So I would call myself — I watched this movie. I called myself “fat beautiful Madame.” So — and always called myself like smart. So whenever I was walking, I would always acknowledge myself, and whenever I was in the presence of other people, before they acknowledge me, I would really tell them, “I’m actually amazing. You really don’t have to tell me, but thank you so much. I’m cool.” So I think you just have to acclimate yourself before others do, so.

MR. PHILLIPS: That’s really interesting. I mean, that’s — yeah, I think that’s really good advice for people to think about the fact that they’re amazing, but also one level underneath that, what makes them amazing, you know, to drill in on, you know, your different skills and the things that really make you stand apart and be proactive and own that. That’s yours.

MS. MAYANJA: Thank you.

MR. PHILLIPS: It’s something to be proud of, you know.

Okay, so you weren’t satisfied and then you left and you started Smart Girls Uganda, really focused on how you can empower young girls and women.

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Paint a picture for me about the world that a young girl finds herself in in Uganda. I’ve been there and I don’t think the United States is perfect by any means, but I know that, in many ways, Uganda is more challenging for young girls and women.

MS. MAYANJA: For young girls, yeah. Why I did that mostly — when you’re young, the girls, you are, practically in Uganda, you’re brought up for marriage. Can you imagine most men in Uganda, fathers, educate their girls because they want to make them, like, have a good CV for marriage, that when a man comes to marry them off, they tell them, “You know, my daughter even has a degree, so that counts for big dowry.” So there is this picture already painted for girls’ future that — I actually tell fathers, “I don’t know why you’re educating your girl to actually go for marriage. Educate her to have her career and be successful.”

And even when girls, yes, you know, when hormones kick in and maybe you get a baby very young,

there you have no ticket to actually finish your career. You're tarnished in the environment. If you do not get a rich man to marry you, to actually get you your own business, you're actually a failure in the community. And then so many girls have what is shown on internet, what is shown on media. The girls are taken to be branded that that's all they are supposed to be is marriage material. And if you are marriage material later on and you also don't look after yourself, then the man is actually going to get another woman and add on to you. So the survival mode is be beautiful, get ready for marriage, stay in marriage, be respectful. And even some girls, when they get into marriage, they never — when they decide, "We are done and out," they never come out with anything. When they leave the family because they are put into marriage, it's like you no longer have access to your father's property, and then you become the property of the guy, and the guy himself doesn't sometimes in the end doesn't like you, gets you off, then gender-based violence. It's too much.

And then also for the rural girls, since — if they don't have enough money to take the girls in school, to take the whole family in school, it's the girl that will stay home. So the boys go to school because they believe later, they will easily get jobs. Oh, it's so much. And even girls if they are educated and they fight the gender norms of not getting married, getting jobs is actually hard. They use their bodies to survive, to get jobs, to survive into the job industry. It takes a strong, smart girl to actually survive in Uganda.

MR. PHILLIPS: So, you paint a pretty dark picture there, but having been working in the space for a while and having grown up in Uganda, do you feel like things are getting better?

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: And why? I mean, what are the — we talk a lot about the problems, but what are some of the solutions? What are some of the things that you think have made a very positive impact on this larger problem?

MS. MAYANJA: What is getting better now also are parents now. Most people who are parents now are educated, are now informed, and now they know better. The religious leaders also now know better, I would say. So many organizations and so many people like me who are fighting this issue. So there is this quite good awareness that is going around, I would say.

Let me say, actually the education, the fact that people — the media itself has penetrated even the rural areas. So the picture's been shown that this is bad and you need better. And now also the survival mode has kicked in. Most people — men who are getting married now realize it's not only them to work. It's okay to let your wife work. And they see they can live better that way. So people are being educated more and being informed more now, yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Got it, okay. And so, your work on the Smart Girls Uganda really focused on this issue of women's empowerment, but then you moved beyond simply this company focus on building self-esteem into a company focused on cleaning clothes.

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: So how did you find yourself in the laundry business?

MS. MAYANJA: So, get this. While I was doing my work — because with Smart Girls, I give them life

skills training and business and entrepreneurship training, right? When I was doing that business and entrepreneurship training, I noticed that the ladies and the women were not actually implementing what I was doing. But I was kind of trying to ignore it. Later in the process, I got married, my amazing, handsome husband. And when I got married, I had to do chores, and the chores meant I had to wash clothes, and I really hate washing clothes, oh my God. I told my husband, if he has to divorce me, I think that's one thing he would divorce me for. And then he's like, "No, there's a solution. Let's get a lady to wash your clothes and it's okay. We'll pay her some little money." And that's what I did. I got a lady in the neighborhood and she did my washing, hand-washing, because, you know, dry cleaners are quite expensive.

So, three months down the road, the lady comes back and tells me, "Oh, Madame, by the way, I think I'm going to get you someone else to wash your clothes because with the money that you've been paying me, I've started a market stall." I was like, "What? Seriously?" [LAUGHING] She's like, "Yeah. Yeah, I've saved up and I've actually started that." And that's when I got the "aha" moment." I was like, "Do you know what?" I told her, "Do you know what, we can start this into a business. Let me test it because I have gotten so many ladies telling me you're training us but we don't have the capital to actually start." And that's — and I've been being messed up with—I had [INAUDIBLE] and were trained to figure out how the youth and the women can start businesses at a very low capital. And it was also working out.

So I sat down with this lady, got 10,000 shillings. That's like three dollars, and I gave her 6,000 to go and look for, like, five more ladies. And then I used the 4,000 for air time to call a few of my friends to see if they needed the service, like, if they hated washing like how I did. And I was happy to get, like, — it was mostly men who were full bachelors, were like, "Oh my God, what have you been waiting for? I've been dying here actually, have two week's clothes." And then that's when I started J Mobile Laundry Service. And the ladies started slowly, slowly doing door-to-door laundry service for the clients I would get. And on the weekends, I would do entrepreneurial and employable skills training for them, tell them how to save the money that we're getting from the business to later start their own initiatives. So it kind of became like a franchise for Smart Girls. I'm still doing the training and still getting them business and I was also kind of getting some little bit backside money for myself. Yeah. And then YALI happened in the process. [LAUGHING]

MR. PHILLIPS: And so with the YALI that you came over here. You spent time at Dartmouth.

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: You developed skills and connections I would imagine, some of the relationships you —

MS. MAYANJA: Oh, yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS:—you have made have been really useful. Can you talk about some of the people that you met through that experience who were really inspiring to you?

MS. MAYANJA: Oh, wow, I think YALI has been quite a life-changing experience for me. First of all, I meant, when we went to Dartmouth, they taught us this amazing thing that I'm still using up until now called Design Thinking and the Business Compass Model. That was, I think, the best capacity-building knowledge that I've gotten so far, because I'm now using it into the business and also

teaching the ladies on how to use it and also with Rotary Uganda, they have adopted it in the program that we are doing.

But the best thing is YALI itself — after the people that I met there, the knowledge, the advice, the peer collaborators and how to build — do more training and capacity-building for the ladies. But the most amazing thing that I will never forget is my Obama moment, President Obama shout-out.

When I went back home — okay, I became famous because of President Obama. Yeah?

MR. PHILLIPS: So tell us that story. What's — I'm sure people want to know your Obama moment. So, paint the picture for us.

MS. MAYANJA: No, the picture is we were seated — because, you know, we have a presidential summit at the end of the fellowship and we get to meet President Obama. I went. I had just come in. I thought I had the worst seat ever. It was behind to the side. And then while I was in the hall, I got a call from the White House and they asked me, "So, how do you pronounce your name?" I'm like, "Jamila Mayanja." She kept on saying, "Okay, I think they may speak about you, but please don't tweet about it." I'm like, "What?" So the whole time, when everything was happening, it was really in my head, "Speak about me? What are these guys talking about?"

So he comes in. Everybody's shouting and he starts his — oh, God, he's amazing — starts his amazing speech. And then he starts mentioning about the few fellows that are doing amazing work—first mentioned some gentleman from Zambia, mentioned a lady Kadijah. And next, he's like, "And we have Jamila Mayanja." Oh my God, I jumped up. I almost shouted, "Hallelujah! Mashallah! What?" But I just shut up — and modeling—and he kept on saying, "Oh, she's modeling." And it was quite funny. He mentioned the work that I'm doing. And yeah, the moment ended, but it was so cool. So, [LAUGHING] yeah, that was the picture.

When I went home, oh my God, everybody wanted to shake my hand. Everybody wanted a hug. And I could give them the hugs, but while marketing my business, "By the way, I'm doing this." [LAUGHING] So everybody who would call me up and tell me, "Come and tell us about your Obama experience," after the Obama experience, I would tell them, "By the way, do you need washing clothes services? I do this and this."

So, that experience marketed my business quite big. I got featured in BBC, media all over the country. But it came with also bad things a bit. I wasn't prepared for that quick growth of the business. Now I had so much business, my ladies were doing double work. So they were falling sick with their hands. And right now, I'm working with other fellows to try and rescale and rebrand, I would say. I'm working on building the first ever laundromat in the country, and it's going to run in containers, run on solar, use recyclable water. And next to it, I would have the training center, so my ladies won't have so much — how do you call it, manual labor? More of doing a service of maybe pick and delivery and maybe doing the laundry when people drop it off and have more time for the trainings, more time for their families, more time to plan for their businesses. And actually, some people who would come around to do their own laundry would have a chance to visit our training center. You never know, they might support someone. So, I'm consulting a Fellow who was in my — the best thing I also got from YALI was the networks. So I'm consulting a Fellow who was in our year, 2015, Daisy Karimi — she's an engineer for solar—advised on how I could work out with the

solar. And also consulting another Fellow in Mauritius [INAUDIBLE] — he's an architect — to help me design out. Then I'm working with another Fellow who's a 2016. He's also an engineer, who will be also talking with also Daisy to make sure the solar panels are actually working. And I'm also working with another Fellow from 2016, Joseph Ddungu, who is very good with paperwork, to actually write out my paperwork and also working with the YALI Uganda Fellowship to help me rally and make sure the whole thing works out. So everything is quite YALI branded.

MR. PHILLIPS: It's a YALI project.

MS. MAYANJA: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Well, I have to say, it's kind of nice to hear a story that starts with you walking into school, saying, "Jamila's awesome," to Barack Obama saying, "Jamila's awesome." And I think it's a nice capstone.

Well, thank you very much for coming. It's been a pleasure to have you here. Jamila Mayanja, who has done incredible work in Uganda, both focused on empowering women, but also moving beyond simply the idea of building confidence, but also identifying the means to grow a business.

[BACKGROUND MUSIC BEGINS]

And we wish you the best of luck with your work moving forward, and really appreciate the time you gave us today.

MS. MAYANJA: Thank you for having me. It was quite amazing.

MR. PHILLIPS: Good. Thank you.

Thank you everyone for tuning in to another YALI Voices Podcast. And thanks, Jamila, for a great conversation. You can reach Jamila on Facebook at Jamila Mayanja. She's also on Twitter at Jamwiltshire. That's Jamila. You can find her on Facebook and Twitter.

Be sure to come back for more inspiring stories from young African leaders of the YALI Voices Podcast. Join the YALI Network at YALI.state.gov, and be part of something bigger.

Our theme music is "E Go Happen" by Grace Jerry, and produced by her friends, the Presidential Precinct. The YALI Voices Podcast is brought to you by the U.S. Department of State and is part of the Young African Leaders Initiative, which is funded by the U.S. government. Thanks everybody.

YALI Voices: Education shouldn't only be for those who can afford it. [audio]

(Courtesy of Manasseh Gowk)

Editor's Note: Since the recording of this podcast, interviewee Emmanuel Osei changed his name to Manasseh Gowk. He is referred to as Emmanuel Osei during the podcast and Manasseh Gowk in the blog.

He was born in war-torn Liberia and had to flee with his mother and siblings to Ghana, where they struggled to make ends meet. Yet YALI Network member Manasseh Gowk, formerly Emmanuel Osei, counts himself lucky. He was able to earn the scholarship he needed to go to school. Now, mindful of others who can't afford an education, Osei is giving back.

"I think there are some people who are just like me," he told the State Department's Macon Phillips in a YALI Voices podcast. "I've seen people that I grew up with, you know, who weren't able to further their education because some of their parents couldn't afford education."

Using his network of connections, Gowk has been raising funds for students facing financial constraints and helping them apply for scholarships.

"I look at their self-development, what they've done to develop themselves beyond classroom tuition. I also look out for students who are ready to help others given the chance," he said.

But helping others get an education isn't his only passion. Listen to the whole podcast to find out how he is leading by example when it comes to helping Ghana's environment.

Don't have access to SoundCloud, iTunes or Google Play? Read a transcript of the podcast below:

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE

BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAMS (IIP)

"YALI Voices Podcast: Emmanuel Osei"

[MUSIC PLAYING]

♪ Yes we can ♪
♪ Sure we can ♪
♪ Change the world ♪

[MUSIC PLAYING]

MACON PHILLIPS: Welcome Young African Leaders! This is the YALI Voices podcast – a place to share some of the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative Network.

My name is Macon Phillips, and I'm really glad you joined us today. Don't forget to subscribe to this podcast. Just visit YALI.state.gov to stay up-to-date on all things YALI.

I had the opportunity recently to sit down and have a conversation with Emmanuel Osei, a young African leader who was born in Liberia during the civil war and ultimately moved to Ghana with his family.

Emmanuel has been doing work in the education field, assisting students and finding ways to fund

their education and giving them the opportunity to study abroad. On top of helping students reach their full potential, Emmanuel also has an interest in Ghana's environment; in particular, its sanitation issues. So let's jump right into my interview with Emmanuel Osei.

It's great to have you here, Emmanuel. Thanks for joining us.

EMMANUEL OSEI: Thank you.

MR. PHILLIPS: Now, Emmanuel, you're based here in Ghana – you're from Liberia originally – you were born there?

MR. OSEI: I was born there.

MR. PHILLIPS: Because your father was a U.N. peacekeeper?

MR. OSEI: Yeah. That's –

MR. PHILLIPS: Is that right?

MR. OSEI: Yeah –

MR. PHILLIPS: OK, and now you're here in Ghana and doing a lot of work in the education space.

MR. OSEI: Definitely.

MR. PHILLIPS: So let's – let's start just by talking about your background. I know there is some – a lot of challenges involved in where you're coming from, but I also wanna hear about some of the things that helped inform you as a leader in what you're doing now. So paint us a picture of what life was like in Liberia when you were coming, coming up.

MR. OSEI: Well, I've been in Ghana since 1990. I was actually born in September – on September 26, 1990. And exactly one week time my mother had to come all the way down here to Ghana because of the Liberian war. So I've never returned back to Liberia ever since, and I've had my education here in Ghana, and so devoting myself to education here in Ghana means a lot to me. I went to primary school, to junior high school under scholarship. My mother couldn't afford and because I was very brilliant I managed to earn a scholarship. So I know what it means to, you know, have the need – the educational need and not have the money to fund yourself. So growing up I've seen people that I grew up with, you know, who weren't able to further their education because some of their parents couldn't afford education. And at high school level my uncle took care of me. He actually took care of my high school education, and when I did very well I enrolled into the University of Ghana where he continued to fund me until I graduated from college and I'm now working. So I would say that I'm a Ghanaian and my mom and dad – my mom and dad are Ghanaians, and since 1990 I've not been back to Liberia, though my dad have stayed there until two years ago when he returned and, unfortunately, passed away.

MR. PHILLIPS: OK. So when you think about where you're coming from, it's all Ghana.

MR. OSEI: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: And that experience it sounds like was not always easy, but you seemed to excel in

school. And, I wonder, a lot of people who are good in school maybe take on a job in the private sector and start a business; some maybe go into art and other things, but it sounds like you have really focused on this nonprofit education space. Why is that? Do you know what – when did the light bulb go off that this is an area you wanted to focus on?

MR. OSEI: I think it came as me identifying with somebody's predicaments, somebody I just met and I felt I could be of help to her because she couldn't enroll into the university because the mom didn't have money. The following year that when she got a chance to be in school, she actually enrolled as a fee-paying student which was, you know, outrageously expensive. And at some point she had to defer – she had to drop out of school. And I know this girl is a very brilliant girl and so I had to go meet people that I knew and people that I knew could be of help to her and eventually raised funds for her, put her back in school. So when I realized that I could capitalize on my links and connections to help people, I decided to stay in that particular field.

MR. PHILLIPS: So where did you take that? You started with one – one person you knew –

MR. OSEI: One person I knew –

MR. PHILLIPS: – and decided to try to grow. So what did you do from there?

MR. OSEI: After that – so what I do is my sister is a teacher in Takoradi, so I arranged with her and asked her to, you know, recommend students that are very good students – potentials who are financially constrained and then I would arrange with people here in Accra, we raise money, and then we send it to cater for those people. So as it stands now I've been able to raise money for two additional people, in addition to the lady I provided support to. She's reading pharmacy in the University of Ghana. She's in the fourth year.

MR. PHILLIPS: That's great.

MR. OSEI: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: And so now when you're working day-to-day here in Ghana, tell us some of the things you're working on other than just that type of program to help students.

MR. OSEI: OK. So I'm working now as a senior recruitment officer for universities in the U.K. So I go to international schools, I go to universities – private universities and public universities – and I interact with students and I talk to them about study-abroad opportunities for these students and scholarship opportunities. Those who are from very rich backgrounds gets to pay full and then they go to study, but those that need support we provide, you know, scholarships, skills that are available. We help them write their essays – scholarship essays – and then they get some of the scholarships that are available.

MR. PHILLIPS: What do you look for in students when you're talking to them?

MR. OSEI: When I'm talking to students I look for students not – I'm a very, you know, brilliant student, but I believe that there are some people who are the wrong place and so, you know, I went to university, I wanted to do linguistics and English, but I did very well in high school. My uncle said, "No," he's funding me, so I had to do banking and finance. So I think there are some people who are just like me. When I was in my second year, I proved to my uncle that I wanted to do something

communication – something English, something linguistics – so I won my first international poetry award in Italy and so I felt so proud of myself that even though I didn't get to do it, I'm still excelling in that aspect of my life.

So when I see people I don't want to jump to the conclusion that once you're not, you know, we are not doing well academically you don't deserve the chance to do other things that you have special interests in. So when I'm looking – when I'm talking to students, I look at their self-development, what they've done to develop themselves beyond classroom tuition. I also look out for students who are ready to help others given the chance. So these are one of the – these are the two main things that I look out for apart from academic excellence.

MR. PHILLIPS: So here in Ghana, as you're doing this work, what are some of the other issues that you're starting to pay attention to as we look forward into the future for both Ghana, but also just the region? What are some of the issues that you think are most interesting?

MR. OSEI: One of the issues has to do with the environment – sanitation. It's one of the things that I really have on my heart. You know, the waste management system here is very very poor – very appalling. The reason I'm saying this is that none of us, we are not ready to change our mindsets on how we pay attention to our environment. And, personally, I take my time to do proper, you know, disposal of refuse. So when I eat I don't just put the – drop the banana peel in a bin; I keep it in my bag, when I go home – I live in a very green area – I live on the University of Ghana campus – we have a very – a lot of green areas – and then I dump in there, and then dump the rubbish inside a bin because I think that if I'm doing this and 10 more people gets to do that, another 10 more people gets to do that, doubling up 100 more people. When we continue to do that the problem that we have – here in Accra when it rains just a day people are crying because we are going to have serious flood – flooding. And last year, June 3rd, we had a very big disaster here in Ghana and it was all over the world. It's because we don't pay attention to our environment. Even those who are educated, even the elites have a problem with this, you know, this refuse disposal, and it's very, very painful. Each time I walk around, even on University of Ghana campus, I want to try to correct people. They think that, you know, you know it all, and they either insult you or they don't even give you any response and they walk away. So one of the key things that I would wish that things would turn around has to do with waste management and the way we treat our environment is very, very poor over here in Ghana.

MR. PHILLIPS: So this is an issue you're gonna be focusing on –

MR. OSEI: Definitely.

MR. PHILLIPS: I know that there's a lot of people in the YALI Network and in general who are already doing a lot of work in this area. So if you're looking for Emmanuel, look for Emmanuel Osei here in Ghana, and he's working on a number of things. His background is in education, but he's starting to think a lot about waste management and its impact on the environment.

MR. OSEI: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: I wanna end by asking you just a few questions that we've been asking everyone that we interview. The first would be something that surprises people about you. You're a pretty low-key guy. You're pretty – pretty focused it seems like, so what's something about you we may not realize?

MR. OSEI: I'm very compassionate.

MR. PHILLIPS: You're very compassionate. What does that mean?

MR. OSEI: I'm ready to share with people not based on the fact that they don't have, but based on the fact that they need it.

MR. PHILLIPS: Right. OK.

Next question: Are you – would you consider yourself a morning person or someone who's more of a night owl – late night person?

MR. OSEI: What I will say – if I go to you, if I'm nocturnal? Do you mean –

MR. PHILLIPS: Do you like to wake up early or do you stay up late?

MR. OSEI: I wake up very early, like this morning. I do that a lot. I sleep late and wake up early.

MR. PHILLIPS: You sleep late and wake up early?

MR. OSEI: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: How do you do that?

MR. OSEI: [LAUGHING]

MR. PHILLIPS: Do you mean you stay up late and you wake up early?

MR. OSEI: I don't plan to do that, but I end up doing that. So it has become a part of me.

MR. PHILLIPS: [LAUGHING]

Well, Emmanuel Osei, I really appreciate the time. Thanks everyone from the YALI Network for tuning in. We'll have another interview for you soon, but until then have a great day. And, Emmanuel, best of luck to you here in Ghana on your important work.

MR. OSEI: Thank you so much. I really appreciate it. It's a pleasure.

MR. PHILLIPS: You bet.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Thank you everyone for tuning in to another YALI Voices podcast, and huge thanks to Emmanuel Osei for taking the time to talk with me.

The way he uses his own connections to broaden the education of others is why we're truly happy to have people like him in the YALI Network.

If you'd like to reach out to him, you can find him on Facebook or Twitter under Emmanuel Osei.

All right, I'm gonna spell that for you: E-M-M-A-N-U-E-L-O-S-E-I. Emmanuel Osei. Look him up on Facebook or Twitter.

Be sure to come back for more inspiring stories from young African leaders on YALI Voices podcast and join the YALI Network at YALI.state.gov and be part of something bigger.

Our theme music is E Go Happen by Grace Jerry and produced by her friends, the Presidential Precinct.

The YALI Voices podcast is brought to you by the U.S. Department of State and is part of the Young African Leaders Initiative, which is funded by the U.S. government.

This is Macon Phillips signing off. Thank you everyone.

[MUSIC PLAYING}

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YALI Voices: Education changed his life. Now he's giving back. [audio]

Fombah Kanneh poses with some of the children he is helping with his startup Gift 2 Change. (Courtesy of Fombah Kanneh)

Fombah Kanneh grew up in a makeshift house in the slums of Monrovia, Liberia, during the country's civil war. As in many other cities, slum life in Monrovia is notoriously hard — plagued by drugs, poverty, hunger and peer pressure to engage in destructive behavior.

Speaking with the State Department's Macon Phillips in a YALI Voices podcast, Kanneh said that, due to his circumstances, he faced "one solid wall" barring a successful future. But thanks to his mother's sacrifices and determination, he also had "one narrow, slim opportunity" to improve his chances: education.

Kanneh, a 2015 Mandela Washington Fellow, founded the startup Gift 2 Change as a way to give back to his community by supporting single mothers and children who are facing the same challenges he did.

"It's my responsibility to get somebody from somewhere, especially in the rural areas, in a slum community, to this stage, that one day too, they can have the opportunity to explain their success story," he said.

"They are not just kids today. But they are the future leaders of tomorrow," he said.
Gift 2 Change combines environmental sustainability with community building and education projects. Kanneh mobilizes young people from the streets to help him collect scrap materials, compost, bottles and other waste to sell to a friend who runs a recycling center. He uses the money

to provide clothing, books, educational materials and training to Liberia's most marginalized children.

Listen to the full podcast to learn how Kanneh found the inspiration to dedicate himself to his community, and like former South African President Nelson Mandela, has come to believe that education "is the most powerful weapon we can use to transform the world."

Don't have access to SoundCloud, iTunes or Google Play? Read a transcript of the podcast below:

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF STATE
BUREAU OF INTERNATIONAL INFORMATION PROGRAMS (IIP)
"YALI Voices Podcast: Fombah Kanneh"

[MUSIC: GRACE JERRY, "E GO HAPPEN"]

MACON PHILLIPS: Welcome, young African leaders. This is the YALI Voices podcast, a place to share some of the best stories from the Young African Leaders Initiative Network. My name is Macon Phillips, and I'm so glad you've joined us today. Before we get started, don't forget to subscribe to the podcast, and visit yali.state.gov to stay up-to-date on all things YALI.

When speaking about having achieved success, people often claim that they started from the bottom. My guest for the edition of YALI Voices, Fombah Kanneh, really did. He grew up in the slums of Monrovia, Liberia, during the civil war. Fombah and his mother were forced to live day to day, often not knowing where they'd sleep, or what they'd eat.

It would have been easy for Fombah to fall in with the wrong crowd. But early on his mother stressed the value of an education. Fombah embraced education as the narrow opportunity he had to escape poverty and violence. After graduating university, he decided he would dedicate his life to helping lift children and single mothers out of poverty.

Now let's jump right into my interview with Fombah Kanneh.

[MUSIC: GRACE JERRY, "E GO HAPPEN"]

Fombah Kanneh, it's great to have you here, and I hope you have had a nice trip from Liberia, and a productive time here. I'm looking forward to talking to you today.

MR. KANNEH: It's an honor to be on YALI Network. Thank you.

MR. PHILLIPS: Absolutely. So we like to, in these conversations, just kind of get a sense of where you're coming from, and what you're working on these days, and look ahead to some of the challenges that are facing us. So let's start by kind of asking the simple question. When you meet somebody for the first time, and they say, hey it's great to meet you, what do you do? How do you answer that question?

MR. KANNEH: I said, thank you, it's an honor to meet you. My name is Fombah Lasana Kanneh. I'm from Liberia. I basically aim to children-related issues, supporting kids in rural Liberia, and in urban slum communities as well, and kids that can't afford. Because once upon a time, I was just like those kids in rural Liberia, especially on the streets of Monrovia. So I have to give back to them. Just

summarizing what I do.

MR. PHILLIPS: I think that's an experience that not a lot of people can understand, what it's like to be a kid on the streets in Liberia. So paint a picture of what life was like for you when you were really young.

MR. KANNEH: Well, terrible. Again, born in poverty as a child was not a decision I made, but to get out of poverty as an adult was a decision I consciously made. Because life, it's not about where you're coming from, it's about where you are going. Yes, I was born in poverty. Yes, my dad passed on. So I grew up with a single mother.

And in the slums of Monrovia, things are really hard, tough. So to some extent, my mom searched up coal or firewood to send me to school during the crisis, the Liberian civil crisis, at the time. So I have one solid wall, and one narrow, slim opportunity.

This solid wall — poverty, corruption, growing up in a violent community — indeed, was really painful. But the slimmest of opportunities I had, at the time, was to go to school. That was the narrow slims of opportunity. It was not deep, it was narrow.

Because you know the time, you want to go to school, your mom is sending you to school, when you're coming back to a community, you have peer pressure. Your friends you play with, today, they're not in school. They want you to just join them. So growing up in the slums of Monrovia was really painful, terrible.

Sometimes you don't even have a square meal. And if you have a square meal, you never know where next you will sleep. If you know where next you'll sleep, you don't know what next activities you guys will do. There was nothing planned. Because your shadow, your clothing, was just at a time where it could come off anytime, because of the crisis.

MR. PHILLIPS: So you're living day to day. You're living in poverty. There's a lot of children that grow up in that situation. I'm sure you have friends and people you know from when you were younger. What was different about you? Why do you think you made some of the right choices, and took advantage of that slim opportunity that education offered?

MR. KANNEH: Thanks to my mother, and thanks to all single mothers out there, you know. Mom encouraged me a lot to go to school. At the time, I told her that it was not really a good stuff to go to school. Like people would say, why do you want to force your son to learn Western education, for example. And unfortunately, my mom is not an educated lady. She doesn't know how to read and write.
But she had a sense that she must send us to school. So I was forced to go to school, to some extent. Until I realized the importance of education, when I graduated from high school, and I started to support myself in college.

But what I do, with the question of what I do, especially giving back to kids in slum communities in rural Liberia. Because a few years ago, I was in that same situation. So I deem it necessary now to give back. I'm talking to you, Macon and the rest, because somebody somewhere, along with my mom, gave me the light, which is education.

So that's why I'm here. So indeed now, it's my responsibility to get somebody from somewhere, especially in the rural areas, in a slum community, to this stage, that one day too, they can have the opportunity to explain their success story.

MR. PHILLIPS: And that's one of the reasons, I'm sure, why you put together Gift 2 Change.

MR. KANNEH: Yeah.

MR. PHILLIPS: Why don't you tell us a little about that? That's the project you're working on right now. And I know that was heavily influenced by your respect for your mother, and sort of came from that. So tell us a little about what that project's all about.

MR. KANNEH: What Gift 2 Change is social entrepreneur startup for sustainability [INAUDIBLE]. Now, thanks to the YALI Network, online, I met this guy. He was a 2014 Fellow, and he also encouraged me a lot to participate in the Mandela Washington Fellowship, through his mentorship, through the YALI online network, I got close to him.

Coming to my project Gift 2 Change — so say he ran a big company, a recycling company. Not really a huge one. So I help collect bags with the young people, from the streets of Monrovia, to give to his company, called Green Cities Incorporated, where he manufactures these into large production. For me, I'm just mobilizing young people, getting my team on the streets, and sent it to him.

So what I would get from this selling of those scrap materials — blocks today, bottles, compost materials — it was to sustain my vision of giving back to impoverished kids, with that campaign called Leave No Child Behind. And I learned that campaign, in many ways, through my fellowship. There's a campaign called Leave No Child Behind. So I said, OK, at least we can take this back home. Especially to my village, my country, then we can run it through Africa.

So that to sustain our vision of giving by whatever I sell to him, sustain myself, and give back.

MR. PHILLIPS: Now in addition to that, you're also teaching classes some. I know that you have used the YALILearns platform, and the classes from that. Can you talk a little about your experience using the resources on that, and from the standpoint of other people who might be listening right now, who might be considering that, how did you find it useful?

MR. KANNEH: Well, it is a library. It is a huge resource center. It's not just the video that you watch for entertainment. It's a video that you watch to inspire you. What are you into? Civil society, for example. What if you're into business and entrepreneurship, or civil leadership? It helps to generate the kind of person you want to see.

So yes, I've benefited from it. So others want to be like me, a role model, right? Or have opportunity at the same time. So what I do with the materials I got through YALI online, through the internet, or through flat disks — so I share it through to PowerPoint presentations.

Soon, for example, we have free and popular speaking. And the lady will come on display, the YALILearns materials from the video presentation, they all watch it, university students. And people from local communities who watch those videos. If they can't understand the American way of speaking, maybe they see it as serious or standard English, they find it difficult.

We have to come — as someone who has participated in a YALI program — and break it down to their level, to the simplest form, so at least communication can flow. So that it can get a message, and be the leader that we all can be, in Africa, in the world at large.

MR. PHILLIPS: So now you're in Liberia, you've got these initiatives, you're teaching these classes. Tell me what the future looks like for you. What are some of the big projects that you're planning to take on?

MR. KANNEH: The future looks bright. But it's only for prepared people. Getting a lot of their materials from YALI online, been a Mandela Washington Fellow, going to the U.S., coming back. It's easy. You can set up bridges virtually. But it's not a point to celebrate here, until you can liberate somebody through education. Like Mandela said, education is the most powerful weapon we can use to transform the world. And as someone that benefited from education, and is still benefiting, I think it is a responsibility, and a driven passion to help kids in rural and slum communities.

In terms of how the future looks bright, we can do it together, by sharing and helping others. It's easier for us to sit in this room and criticize. It's easier for us to lament the years I was born in poverty. So what? Yes, I don't have resources. And so what? Who cares?

I'm thinking right, I've been taking one step. If you can't say, 'I am,' no one will say you are. So you have to, especially young people across the world, in Africa, if you can't be the change that you want to see, and rise up to the occasion, then no one will be. But if you just sit there and don't do nothing to build your future, you become an instrument of violence.

Especially as to what is going on in West Africa. Extremism is all over.

MR. PHILLIPS: Well, let me ask you a question on that. Because I couldn't agree with you more. But I think you would agree that breaking through, sometimes, to people, particularly kids, can be really difficult. In particular, when they're in poverty, or they're not in a good education system. And they kind of turn it off. And you have to break through to them.

For all the people listening today that are focused on similar issues, that are focused on children, that are trying to break through, what have you learned, both from your own experience growing up in poverty, and now doing work focused on children? What are some pieces of advice you could give to those who are trying to pierce through that, and help people understand that they need to stop making excuses and take that initiative?

MR. KANNEH: Well, growing up as a kid in a slum community, and those experiences that I had, personally, I think if we all can just take one single action, it starts in your home. It starts with your own family. Then you can take it out. You have to sacrifice, yes. The challenges ahead of sharing those training materials with kids are very sharp and difficult. I can tell you that it is bread-and-butter stuff.

Well, again, if you don't do it, who will do it? If you can't rise up to change that mention, no one will do it. We all seem to be busy because we want to make profit. Yes, it's good. But the initiative of giving back to kids, you learn to be more tolerant, you learn to be more patient-mannered. You try to understand that you're not doing it because this is the kids of Liberia, but you're doing it for kids. They are the future.

Not just Liberia, but Africa. Not just Africa, but the world. So in order to fill the gap, especially in Africa, we have to educate the kids. You run a program on YALI online called Africa for All. That's a great initiative. And where people are signing, or encouraging people to stand up for women's rights, no violence against women, now having a large campaign around electorate issues. Those are great initiatives.

But if I can recommend an appeal, which of course you already started. We can say Africa for Kids. Stand up for kids. Those campaigns, you know — you may just sit in D.C. and just send messages, you're all OK. But you don't know the impact that you made, except you meet the Fellows interacting with them.

YALI Go Green. We all want to go green, now. We all want to wear green shirts, and sensitize others. Well, if we can all just rise up, Africa stand up for kids. Stand up for kids against violence. Stand up for kids with education. Social injustices, kids suffer from social injustices.

We have a lot of juveniles in prison across Africa. Maybe they can't afford, besides education, dozens of children I earn go to school every day, but go to school hungry. So if we can just start running those campaigns, and we don't have to sit for mark on the rest of the stuff for YALI online to do it — but if you're listening to me, wherever you find yourself, we can create those online platforms, especially through social media, and sell the idea that we need to stand up for kids.
They are not just kids today. But they are the future leaders of tomorrow.

MR. PHILLIPS: Totally agree with you, and I know we've done some work already on climate change, done some work already on women's empowerment. I really appreciate your point that people shouldn't wait around for people in D.C. to come up with this stuff. You're already working on this. So tell me a little bit, something, about you that might surprise most people.

MR. KANNEH: Well, like African youths, we love soccer. And if I'm really down, well, I gain inspiration from soccer. If I can gain inspiration from soccer, and I just look and sit, and see people that don't have anything I have, and they still appreciate themselves. So what does that mean? I have something. So those are the two areas I really get inspiration from.

If you want to give up, and you say, OK, I'm this, I'm that, just look at someone around. They don't have eyes to see. They don't even have feet to walk. What's about you? You have five senses. Beautiful ideas. But just wake up and take something positive.

Like many youths, what stops us from achieving our full potential is the fear factor. When I started, especially when I came out of university with this campaign, Leave No Child Behind, people would say, you're not going to make it. You'll fail. Come on, we'll have a job here for you. You can do this one five hours a day, earn this.

I said no, this is my dream. You don't believe in my dream, then compared to you, I believe in my dream. If my dream of helping one kid to be successful, I can do it.

And lastly, through the YALI online, I'm sharing this vision to a Fellow from Tanzania. So Leave No Child Behind, now, is not just in Liberia, now, but it's crossing borders. From Tanzania, now Fellows from Sierra Leone want to repeat the ideas, because they've been inspired.

Even Alieu Jallow, from The Gambia, have all been inspired. If Fombah can do it, we all can do it.

MR. PHILLIPS: That sounds like the kind of thing you want spreading. You know, sounds like a great thing to grow.

MR. KANNEH: If it can grow, then we all would make an impact.

MR. PHILLIPS: So my next question, this is just a little bit more specific, maybe a personal question. Which is would you consider yourself a morning person or someone who does better late at night?

MR. KANNEH: I think in the morning.

MR. PHILLIPS: You wake up early and get started.

MR. KANNEH: Yes.

MR. PHILLIPS: Do you have any routines or anything that you feel like you do every day or every week that helps you be more organized, and focused?

MR. KANNEH: I'm more focused on building my mind, then focus on taking exercise and building my own body. We need to balance work, with fun, with exercises. But if we balance our mental capacity, which of course is the mindset. The mind, for me, I believe, is the most powerful weapon.

So when I wake up in the morning, for me, before going to bed, the first thing I do is to have an agenda for the next day. If I wake up, where do I start my day from the start? My agenda is already set. When I wake up, I'm strictly into it. Start work at like 5 o'clock in the morning, check a few emails, and follow my daily activities.

From 5 in the morning till 12 are my productive hours, because anything after 12 it would just be a bonus. That's exactly what I focus on.

MR. PHILLIPS: Yeah, I'm hearing that from a lot of people I talk to. It's just get it done in the morning, that's when you're most productive.

OK a final thing is you've been answering a lot of questions. I appreciate it, but if you could ask a question of President Obama, what would your question be?

MR. KANNEH: See if I had the opportunity, I'd say, Mr. President, thousands of kids in Africa don't have the opportunity to go to school. What you can do, in your own weak way, as president of the free world, as a fighter, to help kids in Africa? Kids in the world? Not just limited to Africa. Giving an education.

MR. PHILLIPS: OK, great. Well, I really appreciate it. We've had a great conversation with Fombah, and wish you the best of luck back in Liberia.

What a great conversation that was with Fombah. It's hard not to be inspired by his story and his commitment to help others facing similar situations. He figured out, early on, that education unlocks the key to a better life. Thank you, Fombah, for taking the time to chat with us.

If you'd like to get in contact with Fombah, you can find him and his organization on Facebook under

Gift 2 Change. That’s gift, the number two, and change. Be sure to come back for more inspiring stories from young African leaders on the YALI Voices podcast.

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